

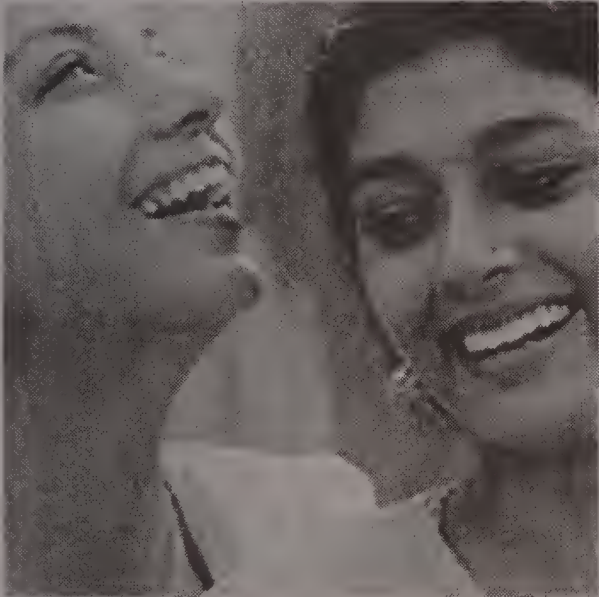
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- Bronski's
Pleasure Principle
- Queering Welfare
Reform
- Maine Debates

THE NATIONAL QUEER PROGRESSIVE QUARTERLY

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FIRE **Ignities Debate: Local/Global Views**





The national queer progressive quarterly

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PRISONER PROJECT

PenPals 44

My name is Richard W. Simmon #242147. But, I'd rather you write me as Rickie W. Simmon #242147. I am writing you because I would like to be put on your mailing list, as well as get in touch with other homosexuals. I'm open to all newsletters.

Any and everything you send will be greatly appreciated. I would like to be informed about gay community lawyers, gay rights, and so on. A lot of us homosexuals in prison need to be aware of what's going on. A lot of us are refused privileges and jobs just because of our sexual preferences. We need to be in touch with our brothers and sisters.

In prison, staff really messes over us, as well as say we are the devil and we should be locked away and killed. They treat us differently. Call us names. Spit on us. Spit in our food. Deny us medical treatment, water, food, and so on. And the HIV positive individuals. They get the worst end of the stick as staff watches them die.

We need newsletters that will put us in touch with organizations and groups, as well as gay or lesbian attorneys to help us.

My sister is a lesbian. She used to keep me in tune to what's going on, but she's having her own problems right now. I have wrote a couple articles for a newspaper. I'm only in prison for writing bad checks. I will be looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

Rickie W. Simmon #242147

Algermax Correctional Facility

PO Box 600

Munising, MI 49862

To all people and organizations that have included your names in support of the Call for an Open Process. I applaud your courage.

I now include my name to this long list, and I do this even though I sit in a prison cell in the State of Indiana. It is in some ways harder and in some ways easier to stand up for gay/lesbian/bisexual rights over the murder of Matthew Shepherd. But we all need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves what and who we stand for and not what's only good

for us but the entire GLBT communities we live in.

Sincerely,

Chris Vebert #871306

Indiana State Prison Location C-159

PO Box 41

Michigan City, IN 46361-0041

I am a 29 year old gay white man who is currently in prison. I have been locked up now for over 7 years. I was sentenced for 3-10 years in 1991 on a charge of I.D.S.I. When I was 21, I got sexually involved with a 15 year old boy. It was consensual, but his mother pushed the issue so here I am, still fighting to be released from prison.

The Pennsylvania Parole Board is just like the rest of the politicians. The anti-gay attitudes continue. This is just one more way to try and oppress homosexuality. I was never exposed to such bureaucratic bullshit until coming here. Even the prison here is so anti-gay, our library will not even carry one book on the subject. Also, if you even get caught holding hands with another inmate, straight to the hole. This is one of the most cruel things they can do, to try and stop any kind of relationships from coming to pass.

I am now 4 1/2 years over my minimum sentence, and only because I choose not to hide my homosexuality. I make it known I am gay and proud of it. Any why not? Society has had us feel ashamed and oppressed long enough. So why shouldn't we be able to step out and shine? To declare our right to a life of happiness? I will not try to let them push me into a "closet" for anything, and if it means I have to max this sentence out, well then so be it. At this point I feel like a political prisoner anyway. I mean if the tables were turned and it was a 15 year old boy having sex with a 21 year old woman, no one would say anything. But because its a homosexual relationship, I must be a pervert and labeled for life as a sex-offender. I mean, where is the justice? I believe its time to stand up and speak out. We have

the right to fall in love with whoever we wish, whether straight or gay.

I would greatly appreciate any help you can be by publishing this letter. Also, I am looking to find other gays to correspond with. I will welcome any and all replies, and answer all letters.

Thank You,

James Mitchell BP-4299

R.D. #10, Box 10

Greensburg, PA 15601

My name is Shawn LiQuia, and I am an inmate in Waupun, Wisconsin. I saw your address in a Prison Correspondence Magazine and decided to try to see if it will develop anything. I am 23 years old (born September 23), stand 6'1", weigh 195 pounds, muscle, blondish-brown hair, blue eyes, single.

My family disowned me because of the prison sentence, and I'm pretty much alone in the world! I have no one to write to, and no gay materials or correspondence. I'm wondering if you have any reading materials for me? Are there any newsletters or such? I have no income at this time, and can't afford anything!! Where are lists of pen-pals as well? I'd love to have people to write to—either other inmates or not!

Do you wish to know more about me? I'm incarcerated for computer hacking. I have a 10 year prison term. I am a first-time offender, non-violent, white-collar crime. I grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, in a town called Negaunee. I graduated high school, have two years of college behind me. I have plans of continuing my college here, in computer-mechanical drafting. I love music, of all types. I played the flute in high school and college. I read a lot. I draw and write poetry a lot as well.

As I said, my family doesn't communicate with me, so I am looking for pen-pals and friends to write and correspond with.

Shawn LiQuia #347407

Waupun Correctional Institution

PO Box 351

Waupun, WI 53963-0351

Marla Erlien

STOP THE DEATH PENALTY

"From the evidence, it is clear that anti-gay hatred was a factor in this crime, but the sheer savagery of the murder of Matthew Shepard is of such a magnitude that *there should be no question* but to seek the most severe punishment available under the laws of Wyoming—the death penalty. Society must send the strongest message that brutality of this kind is intolerable, indefensible and deserving of the most severe punishment."

—Rich Tafel, executive director of Log Cabin Republicans

In the outcry following the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, no one was surprised that the Log Cabin Republicans, presaging the Wyoming prosecutors, called for the death penalty. After all, the death penalty is a crime-fighting tool to the Republican Party and the gay Republicans are Republicans first. What is disturbing is that no national glbt group has gone on record opposing the death penalty. When Rich Tafel said, "There should be no question but to seek the ...death penalty," that was provocation to raise the questions, to look at the history, and to take an uncompromising stand against the death penalty. But here we are, months later with little public discussion or debate among us about why we support or oppose the death penalty, and still

no word from our national glbt organizations.

When in late December, the Prosecutor in Wyoming asked for the death penalty against Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, the accused murderers of Matthew Shepard, the Wyoming press contacted national glbt organizations for responses. In the *Star Tribune* of January 6, 1999, HRC and NGLTF were quoted:

Wayne Besson, HRC associate communications director in Washington, D.C., said the organization has not taken a position on capital punishment. "We have a half-million members, so I imagine we have a half-million different opinions on the death penalty," he said. "We're not going to get into that spirited debate."

"That means either the death penalty or the murderers spending the rest of their lives in prison," he added. "Either way for what they've done they shouldn't see the light of day."

Rebecca Isaacs, political director of the NGLTF in Washington, D.C., said the group's silence on the capital punishment issue should not be construed as support for the prosecutor's decision to seek the death penalty in the Shepard case.

NGLTF, responding to requests from anti-death penalty groups, is scheduled to issue their position on the death penalty at the end of February.

Equally surprising is that Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, our crusaders for justice, have no position. According to Peg Bryon, Public Education Director in an email to Queerwatch, "Lambda has not taken a position on the death penalty. The organization has a very specific mission: test-case litigation, education, and public policy work to defend the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV and AIDS. We formulate positions that fall within this mandate, and, to date, the general question of the death penalty has not been raised within our work."

Jeff Montgomery of the Triangle Foundation in Detroit, Michigan, and an anti-violence activist, issued a press release stat-

ing, "A movement built on ending violence and inequity cannot condone state-imposed violence—violence of any sort—especially that is unfairly meted out and dictated by the whim of law enforcement, more often than not at the peril of marginalized segments of society."

The History

Here Montgomery alludes to the national history of the death penalty. With little effort, one can learn that between 1967 and 1976 executions in the US were stopped due to clear evidence of racial injustice and the arbitrary character of its application. The Supreme Court ruled that the states must establish standards of fairness and justice if capital punishment is to be used. By 1976, with the political backlash to the social movements of the 60s and early 70s already taking shape, the Supreme Court decided that such standards had been met by the states, and their decision in *Gregg v. Georgia* allowed capital punishment to resume under a system of "guided discretion" for juries.

Such safeguards have completely failed. In 1990, Justice Thurgood Marshall, commenting on *Gregg v. Georgia*, warned that "the promise that capital punishment would be administered with fairness and justice...has become a cruel and empty mockery. If not remedied, the scandalous state of our present system of capital punishment will cast a pall of shame over our society for years to

come. We cannot let it continue."

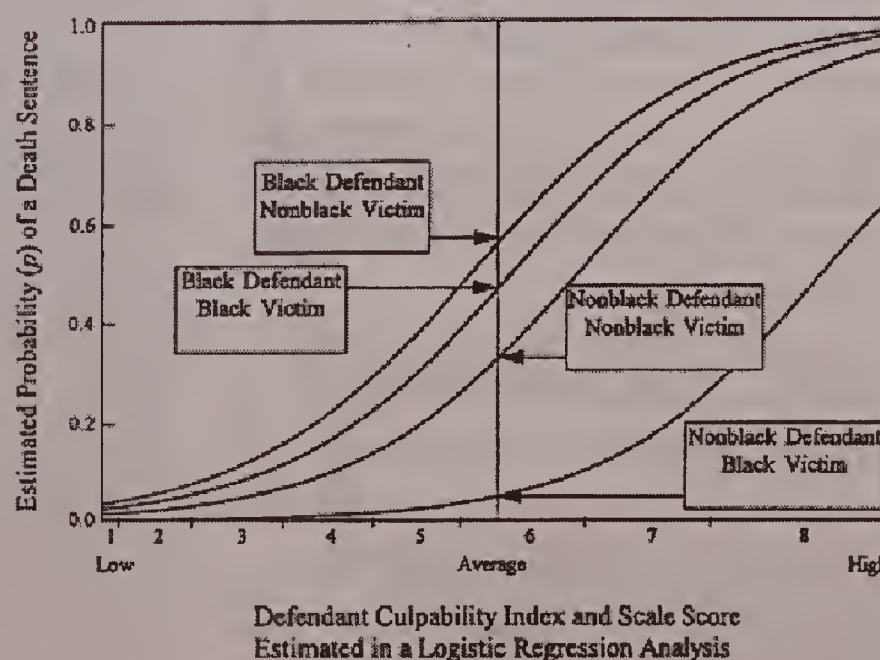
A "pall of shame" hangs over glbt organizations. Studies on death penalty use document dramatic and pervasive racial discrimination and demonstrate the complete failure of the "justice" system to enforce equal protection under the law. Equal protection under the law, that should be a familiar idea to gay rights organizations—but then, what is it about the phenomenon of the death penalty that locates it outside the purview of national queer advocacy groups? Is it racism? US policies regulating capital punishment are in direct conflict with international human rights standards. Prisons are filled with people who have not had access to a serious legal defense, some of whom sit on death row. What about human rights, HRC? Perhaps the answer to why HRC's Besson can shrug off the Wyoming reporter's inquiry on the death penalty with "we're not entering

that spirited debate" is contained within the following caution from Justice William Brennan in 1987: "It is tempting to pretend that minorities on death row share a fate in no way connected to our own, that our treatment of them sounds no echoes beyond the chambers in which they die. Such an illusion is ultimately corrosive, for the reverberations of injustice are not so easily confined."

Scoundrel Times

Bigotry and revenge drive calls for the death penalty. Historically a number of internationally famous cases demonstrate this. Sacco and Vanzetti, Italian anarchists who came to trial in 1921, were effectively convicted and executed for being unpatriotic foreigners. No specific evidence was ever presented against them on the charges of murder and robbery. The Scottsboro defendants were punished for being Black. The famous case involved nine young

Estimated Race of Defendant and Race of Victim Effects
in Jury Death Sentencing Decisions Among All Death Eligible Cases
Philadelphia 1983-93



continued

Black men, ages 13-21 years, on trial in the South for raping two white women. They were tried twice: in 1931 and 1933. The guilty verdicts in the first trial were overruled by a higher court because Blacks had been excluded from the jury. In the second trial, despite the fact that one of the alleged rape victims testified that none of the men had touched or even talked to her, guilty verdicts with death penalties were again rendered; Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were Communists falsely charged with giving atomic secrets to the KGB. They were executed in 1953, the victims of McCarthyism.

The calls for the death penalty in the Matthew Shepard case come at the very moment that we are approaching the denouement of the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a radical journalist and former Black Panther sentenced to death after being falsely convicted in 1982 for the murder of a Philadelphia cop. Mumia's case has generated an international movement to stop his execution in the tradition of the mobilizations for Sacco and Vanzetti, in the Scottsboro case, and for Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. His execution could come before the end of the year. On April 24 in Philadelphia there will be a Millions for Mumia March, including a *Rainbow Flags for Mumia* contingent, representing Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Two-spirit, Trans communities.

It is critical to note that it is the race of the victim, not that of the assailant that predicts the greatest number of convictions and the harshest penalties. Thus, it is not minorities accused of crimes, but minorities accused of crimes against whites on whom the force of the law comes down most heavily. It is those who violate the boundaries of race, sexuality, and citizenship (with "foreign" ideas), who appear to provoke extreme social vengeance, whether in the famous cases cited, or the more normal operations of the law that they dramatize and call attention to.

It is critical that we have a public "spirited debate" in our communities about the death penalty, one that challenges the illusion that "we" are immune from the corrosive effects of the sanctioned violence and violation of human life that the death penalty exacts.

For more info on the Mumia March, email rainbows4mumia@hotmail.com or call: 212-633-6646

Happenings to Watch Out For

Millennium March Battle Grows

Youth Publish Ad Opposing NYAC and NGLTF Involvement

After a year of challenging the Millennium March on Washington Board of Directors to engage grassroots activists in an open, public discussion of the issues and concerns motivating such an event, the Ad Hoc Committee to Open the Process has expanded their work. [see GCN, vols. 23#4 and 24#1 for a full account of the history.] According to Leslie Cagan from the Ad Hoc Committee, "We have begun a process, including talking to other groups, about organizing a nationwide discussion to reinvigorate the progressive LGBT movements toward a new, independent vehicle for progressive activism." Members of the National Youth Action Coalition (NYAC) published an ad in the Washington Blade arguing for NYAC and NGLTF to resign from the MMOW Board of Directors. [See next page]

Talking Back to Ex-Gay Politics

A diverse coalition of bisexual organizations launched a provocative ad campaign in December, countering the "ex-gay" conversion therapy ads that the Religious Right wants to air on TV. Bisexual activists crafted the ad to respond to the Christian Coalition and affiliated organizations' anti-gay propaganda. The ad counters the position that "converted" Christians are all heterosexual, and that sexual orientation is easily defined into two invariable categories. "The current national debate has been dumbed down to a question of whether people's sexuality is fixed at birth or can be changed through brainwashing," explained GenderPAC Executive Director Riki Ann Wilchins. "Painting sexual identities in such stereotyped fashions cheapens a meaningful discussion down to a TV commercial..." The Right's "conversion therapy" campaign began with a series of national newspaper ads this summer. [See ad in this issue of GCN, p. 46]

Equality Begins at Home

Equality Begins at Home, an unprecedented national week of actions during the week of March 21 - 27, is a major initiative to push state lawmakers to support a platform of equality. Never before in the history of the gay rights movement has there been a coordinated political campaign of actions in all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Equality Begins at Home represents a new phase of the movement—a focus on state organizing and legislatures where the vast majority of debates and decisions about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender equality occur. Check out your state-wide organization for details.

We are asking progressive young people and allies to join us in calling on the leadership of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) to step down from the Board of Directors of the Millennium March on Washington.

This is not an attack on our leaders.

It is because we respect and support our leaders that we are asking them to stay true to their mission as progressive organizations, by not supporting this event. We hope our letters and signatures will empower them to step down based on concrete support from their constituents.

When one of us is oppressed, we are all oppressed.

We recognize the connections between oppressions and are unwilling to support a march and organizing process that does not. We cannot organize in a "Gay and Lesbian bubble." We live in a society where those born unequal stay unequal. To work for true queer liberation we must dedicate ourselves to fighting collectively for the liberation of all people.

Who defines the "mainstream?" What is the "far left?"

"What this is all about is a fight between the far left of our movement and the overwhelming majority of our movement who are in the mainstream. Everybody is welcome to be part of this march, but this is going to be a march for the mainstream."

--Robin Tyler, Executive Producer of the Millennium March of Washington (MMOW).

The Millennium March simplifies our issues to the least common denominator. Who gave Robin Tyler the right to define the mainstream of our movement? We believe queer and progressive people support a wider agenda than has been defined by Robin Tyler, the Human Rights Campaign, or, as yet the MMOW leadership. By encouraging assimilation and accommodation to the status quo they are undermining progressive people who are working for racial and economic justice, gender and sexual freedom.

*** GLBTQ²A = Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning and Allied.**

Rea Carey, National Youth Advocacy Coalition
Kerry Lobel, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Dear Rea and Kerry:

As a body of youth activists within the queer movement and queer activists within the youth movement, we are writing to express to you our position regarding NYAC's and NGLTF's involvement with the board of directors of the Millennium March on Washington (MMOW).

We do not believe that the Human Rights Campaign will conduct or is open to conducting, an event that is mindful of the needs or agenda of young people. We do not support your involvement with the board of directors of the MMOW and call on you to withdraw.

We understand and respect why you became involved in this process. However, we think that you have made a serious mistake on behalf of the queer youth movement. We are calling on NYAC and NGLTF to be accountable to us as your constituency, the goals we collectively support, the young people of this nation, and the movement we comprise.

We realize this would represent a great risk to NYAC and NGLTF, its funding sources, and the political access that has been gained. However, we feel that the movement and community would be better served by this courageous, progressive, and ground-breaking statement about our values, goals, agenda, and mission.

In the end, it comes down to what we are asking for. Are we fighting for some of us to be tolerated, perhaps included within the existing power structure that does not and will not foster societal change? Or are we fighting for a progressive agenda that includes a redistribution of power, access, and wealth and the elimination of violence, exploitation, discrimination and repression? We are asking for the latter.

(This letter was signed by over 130 young people in just one week. These names have been forwarded to NYAC and NGLTF, however they are not included here in order to protect the confidentiality of these young people.)

When money talks, people who can't afford representation don't get heard. Gay and lesbian politics are driven by money. In our society organizations need money to operate, and use money to buy power. One of the best ways to raise money is to do what the people who have it want you to do. People who currently and historically have not been given access to money (people of color and poor, trans, young, and old people) have less power in a movement where power is based on money. We applaud the work of the activists who have invested their lives and \$\$ in the strength of these organizations, however these organizations still don't address the overall needs of *GLBTQ²A people. The MMOW structure replicates the same power imbalance which has historically been used to oppress *GLBTQ²A people.

We support why they signed on, now they should get off.

We know NYAC and NGLTF support progressive values and they are attempting to participate in this process while staying true to these values. However we see the redistribution of power, access and wealth as essential to a progressive agenda. These ideals have yet to be addressed and are not championed by the leadership of the MMOW. In light of the inherent inequality of the process, and the narrowness of the MMOW focus, we are asking NYAC and NGLTF to affirm their commitment to progressive values by resigning from the MMOW board.

We are at a turning point in this movement.

There is currently a groundswell of progressive thought and action which has yet to be directed at the national level. By stepping off the board, NYAC and NGLTF would affirm their accountability to a progressive agenda and show their unwillingness to compromise these values. The impact of this statement could change the path of our movement. We need their leadership.

We need to move on.

A decision will be made soon by the leadership of NYAC and NGLTF. Whatever decision they make we need to stay involved. There are thousands of GLBTQ²A young people coming to our nation's capital. Our focus needs to be on the challenges and opportunities this creates, not the internal politics of this event.

There are more important things to worry about.

A network of progressive GLBTQ²A young people and allies is forming, to talk about and plan for the MMOW. The network has no independent agenda or viewpoints, it exists to facilitate open discussion and action planning. Issues may include the presence we would like to have on 3/30/00, and creating safe spaces for young people in D.C. throughout the weekend, among others. Get involved! Email the network at youthrespond@hotmail.com, or mail us at: Youth Respond, 1822 13th Street, NW in Washington, DC 20009.

**"We're not creating a nation,
we're creating an event."**

- Elizabeth Birch on the MMOW

**What's the point
of planning an event
that doesn't
change the face
of our nation?**

To add your name to this letter or to get involved in collecting signatures, e-mail at youthletter@hotmail.com or mail to: Youth Letter, 1822 13th Street, NW in Washington, DC 20009 or call 202-667-1164.

Marla Erlien

IMAGINING INDIA for the West

FIRE

Directed by Deepa Mehta, 1996

Starring: Shabana Azmi; Nandita Das



"Even though *FIRE* is very particular in its time and space and setting, I wanted its emotional content to be universal. The struggle between tradition and individual expression is one that takes place in every culture. *FIRE* deals with this specifically in the context of Indian society. What appealed to me was that the story had a resonance that transcended geographic and cultural boundaries."—Deepa Mehta

Deepa Mehta's film, *FIRE*, opened in Canada and the US in 1997 to wild applause, even standing ovations at film festivals. Billed in North America as a "lesbian-themed film," *FIRE* played queer film festivals, international film festivals and, in the US, at art cinemas or those that show the non-blockbuster genres. What *FIRE* is the story of varies depending on who is doing the telling. While *FIRE* was reviewed in mainstream and queer media, the reviews, for the most part, did not engage the time, space and setting of the film—a middle class, Delhi household where tradition and resistance to it meet.

Lawrence Van Gelder, reviewing *FIRE* in the *New York Times* (August 22, 1997), sums up the film with, "this glossy melodrama, mixing references to Indian

mysticism and the epic poetry of the Ramayana with late-20th century feminism, teeters unsteadily between sociology and soap opera." Interestingly, Van Gelder mentions the Ramayana, but only to show how out of step India is with the US. "Perhaps bold and novel in India, its feminist messages seem dated by American standards." Film critic, Roger Ebert notes the Indian context but, again to show that unlike the west, "Lesbianism is so outside the experience of these Hindus, we learn, that their language even lacks a word for it." Another review, "Deepa Mehta's *FIRE* is a plea for women's self-determination that, for all its good intentions, will probably strike viewers in this country as a bit obvious. The film depicts a middle-class family in today's New Delhi, where feminist ideas are plainly still



a novelty.” In their (imperial) eyes, Mehta depicts as India’s present what “we” have already transcended. As if the West knows no “stultifying cultural norms and traditions,” or families where feminist ideas are “still a novelty.” As if lesbianism here is, pardon the expression, a “household” word. As if the Mapplethorpe controversy were not live in recent memory, as if battles over “Heather Has Two Mommies” and “Daddy’s Roommate” didn’t animate school boards and communities throughout the country. As if, finally, questions of women’s place and desire in the home, society and nation, weren’t hotly contested issues of ideology and politics, but differences between “East” and “West,” confirming “our” superiority to “them.”

Global/Local Connections

FIRE’s treatment of desire between women is positioned in a tense relationship between global and local forces, contexts, imaginations. Ebert’s suggestion that “lesbianism is so outside the experience of these Hindus...” suggests that the meanings of lesbianism have

already been patented—in the West, available for export. Others’ sexual openness will be measured by this (imagined) standard—what does he have in mind, one wonders—*Ellen*? If the film’s lesbianism is well, old hat, its critique of heterosexuality is also dismissed, particularized—what would you expect with those jokers for husbands? or with repressive Indian “traditions” of arranged marriages, double standards, requirements that women bear heirs, etc. It is as if the power dynamics exposed between men and women pertain only to a distant “local” context, as if women’s wayward desires can be safely explained, and contained there.

The following interview with Geeta Patel negotiates the multiple connections between the global and local contexts of *FIRE*, in the hope of complicating and proliferating its meanings, and providing ways to recognize and think through its subversions. Patel’s discussion of the film and the violent opposition to it, most dramatically in Bombay and Delhi, further elaborates the national discussion, provoked by *FIRE* that is occurring in India.

Geeta Patel

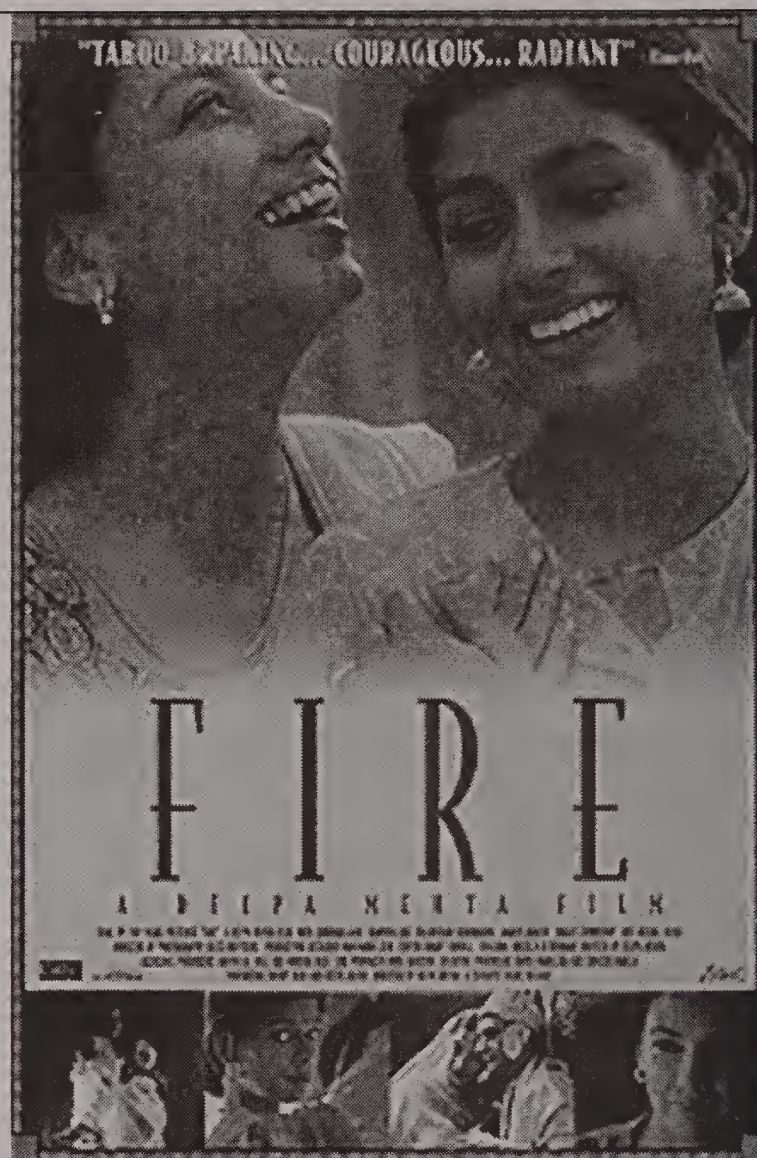
TRIAL BY FIRE: A Local/Global View

Talking with Geeta Patel

GCN: What do you think *Fire* is doing?

Geeta: *Fire* goes to the space of debates around sexuality and tradition that came out of the colonial period. What it's doing in those debates, in a lineage with Muslim author Ismat Chughtai's short story "Lihaaf" published in the 1940s and cited for obscenity, is taking on a space that was constructed as safe—the domestic space. This space was constructed as safe both in relation to what a woman did in it—her bodily practices in the context of tradition and modernity—and because it was produced as implicitly and explicitly heterosexual.

Fire is a film that confronts tradition as it is articulated in the late 20th century, in relation to globalization of the film/video industry and of desire. *Fire* takes up the space of a household that is traditional in a 20th century rendition of the "traditional." The household in *Fire*, a fairly typical middle class one, negotiates the present through a constructed past. The beliefs and practices followed by the women in it are a modern con-



struction of tradition. Like all such households, it thinks of itself as conforming to a past that always was. The film *Fire* shows us tradition as something necessary to the organization of a middle class household, shows us the forms of seemingly acceptable desire in this household, shows us the assumptions of safety woven into a "traditional" household, and then uses (queer) desire to undo the whole range of assumptions codified into the household. This household is not just any household—it embodies the desire lodged in nationality. For that reason, I think *Fire* is a much more dangerous film than one that simply sets up lesbians living in an elsewhere—"independent" of family, on their own. What the film says is that there is nothing safe. The place that you thought was really safe, this late 20th century traditional joint family that has a take-out and video store downstairs is a place that is truly not safe because you never know where the desire you didn't expect to see in it might take it.

The standard critiques of the film by South Asians living in the diaspora and in South Asia are that it depicts the men in the film very badly; it parodies Indian masculinity; and that the only way women can have a relationship with each other is if they are dissatisfied with these failed men. Those are critiques that have to be listened to, but they must be considered in relation to the history of (feminized and hypermanly) masculinity produced in the context of colonialism and nationalism, in relation to productions of right-wing hypermasculinity in South Asia during the colonial and (post)neocolonial periods. The ghost of Gandhi shadows the film, as does the repudiation of feminized masculinity by organizations like the Shiv Sena. I don't think the film is saying something about all South Asians, it is located in a particular neighborhood of Delhi—Lajpat Nagar—within a particular milieu, and a particular organization of class, middle class; but because the film takes on sites of trouble that are pan-Indian or pertain to nationalism per se, it ends up being a film that has a wider effect than might be implied by the location in which the narrative is set. Also as Deepa Mehta has said so clearly—the middle class in India is huge (350 million according to Mehta), and this film certainly attempts to talk to it and take on some of the assumptions folded into a “traditional” middle class household.



Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhry): Keeper of secrets

Male Sexuality

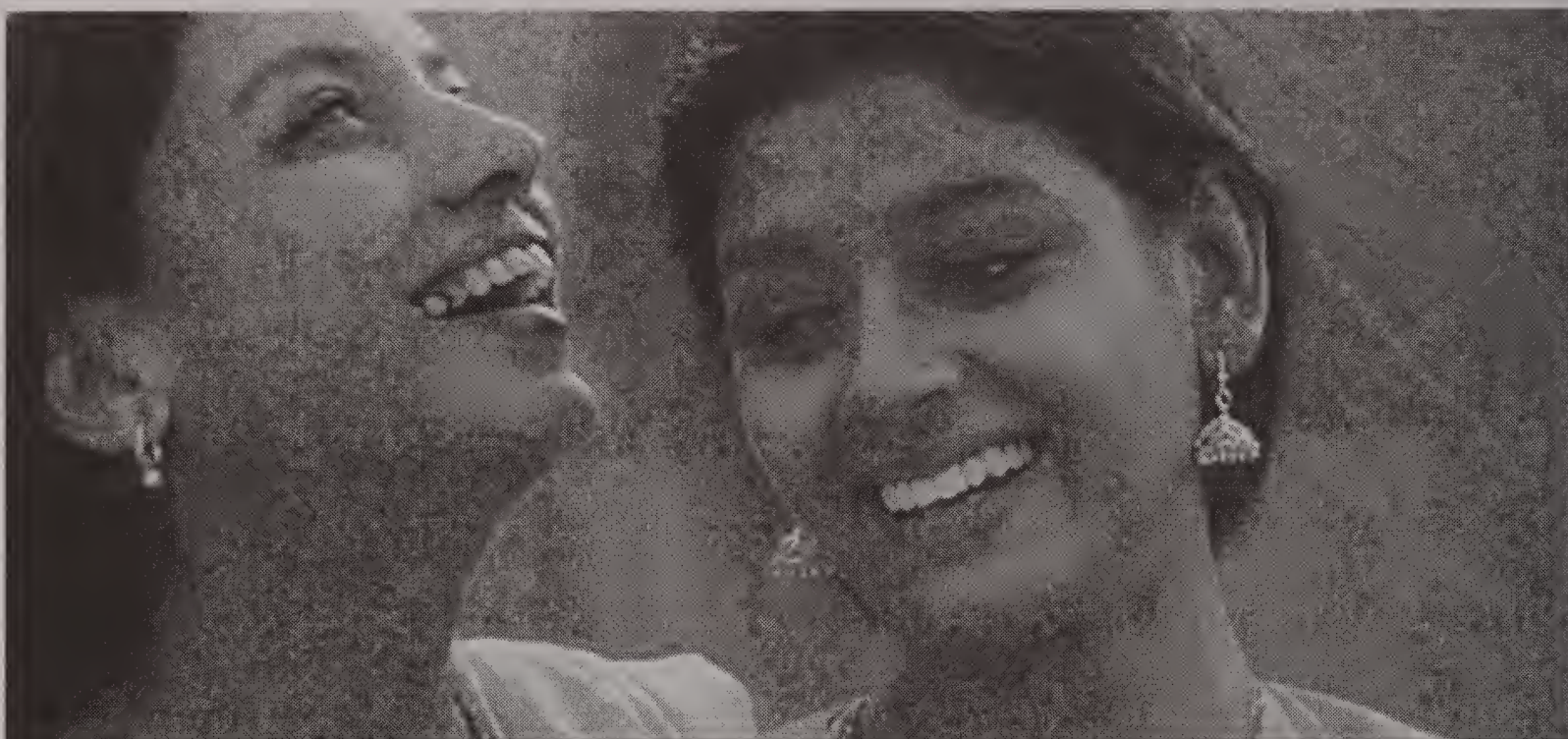
GCN: In *Fire*, Radha's husband struggles against sexual desire as religious work. What is that about?

Geeta: It is hard not to think of Gandhi. Ashok, Radha's husband has this Guru with an ashram along the river that is reminiscent of Gandhi's ashram on the Sabarmati river. And you have the hegemony and dominance of the Ramayana as the guiding text in the film, as well as the text recited in the ashram, and the text whose performance the Guru attends which again figures Gandhi's evocation of the Ramayana. The closing down of masculine desire, as renunciation, was something promoted by Gandhi. However, renunciation and asceticism are both modes that predate Gandhi.

GCN: And the servant's sexuality?

Geeta: The servant's sexuality comes out of the position of the sidekick in Sanskrit drama and continues into Hindi film. Mundu, the servant, is liminal; he doesn't belong to the family or the outside. His sexuality is troubled in its portrayal. He can only get off by masturbating, in the home, in front of Biji, the mom. This form of Mundu's desire is extraordinarily transgressive. His masturbation is displayed in the center of the household, in front of the matriarch who dominates the household through her silence and her bell which tolls any infractions. Biji's anger at Mundu's transgressions is hidden behind the door, it cannot be heard until Radha exposes Mundu by coming home early and opening the door. Also Mundu's masturbation occurs when he replaces the Ramayana (the proper text that tells the rules of proper behavior) by a sex video that is kept secretly in the store for special customers. Only Mundu and Jatin, the younger son, know about this stash. In using the T.V. for his sex video, Mundu transforms the television, placed in the center of the household, and watched by everyone in the house (also the panopticon, the cyber version of Biji), into the object that permits him to explore his own desire. The T.V. has to be rescripted into propriety after Mundu's resignification of it is discovered—the family sits down together (with

Geeta Patel



Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das): Desire lodged in nationality

Mundu on the floor) before the T.V. to watch the Ramayana. The T.V. and videos, remember, are the things that finance this household.

The only place Mundu can occupy is a place of trouble, as the teller, as the watcher, and as the keeper of the entire household's secrets it is given to him to expose the doings in the household. Mundu lives between the women and the men. He lives at home, helps the women run the household, and also works in the video store and helps the men run the store. Like the women he is expected to be sort of pure (unsexed), but like the men he is permitted certain kinds of fantasies (but what he does in front of Biji is not acceptable).

Mundu's desire revolves around the women, but in a complicated relationship to myth in Hindi cinema. His desire for Radha is told by him in representations taken from a cinema/video

tradition—this is the other side, the purer side of the desire he practices using sex videos. He tells a tale as a way of negotiating a leverage for desire thwarted—his imaginary desire for Radha which has been thwarted when the two women get together and his sexual practices, thwarted by Radha when she finds him out. Mundu as the keeper of the secrets, is expected to keep them, and when he does the household runs along, a little lopsided, but nonetheless, moving at its own pace. It is when Mundu tells, that the household begins to fall off its stride. So, in order to undo the household, we need a plot that incorporates both Mundu and the women—and their diverse desires.

Mundu is linked to the women in other ways—his struggle to not get thrown out of the household by Ashok when Radha tells on him and when he tells on Radha, is in

contrast to the women who want to leave when they are found out. Mundu's desire and Radha's desire each upset the household economy, but in different ways. But in the lineage of fictional and film narrative, a version of Mundu's desire has been anticipated as an option (is more likely to be a heterosexual sub-plot, albeit extremely disturbing which upsets but does not completely undo the appropriate heterosexual alignments) whereas the desire between the women completely upends the heterosexual alignments of the household.

Radha, Sita and Hindu Lore

GCN: What is Mehta doing with the names of the two women?

Geeta: Nobody in the West has discussed this, but the Censor Board in India asked that the name of Sita be changed to Nita. Why? Sita in myth (in the epic

Ramayana) is the absolutely virtuous wife. As shown over and over again in this film, Sita walks through fire to prove her virtue to her husband Rama when she is challenged by Rama's *praja* (populace). There is no getting away from what Sita, the name, the mythic figure and the allusion to Sita's trial by fire, is doing in this film. The name negotiates wifeliness, virtue, devotion and tradition in its 20th century incarnation. Radha is more interesting. She is the consort of Krishna, another incarnation of Vishnu (Rama is also an incarnation). Although the Hindu nationalist, Shiv Sena, was upset that Radha had been portrayed troublingly, their concern seemed to articulate a complete lack of knowledge of who and what Radha was and represented. What the film does is work with the stories of Radha (familiar to

anyone who knows about Radha lore) as the sexually transgressive woman/*gopi*/wife who leaves at night to meet her lover Krishna—the dark lord. The film, in the naming of the two women, takes on two different icons of mythic femininity that have come into the late 20th century and makes them fall in love with each other.

GCN: Mehta makes the film, obviously wanting to show the film in India, and then when Hindu nationalists riot against the film, she states she didn't want to make trouble, just to make a film.

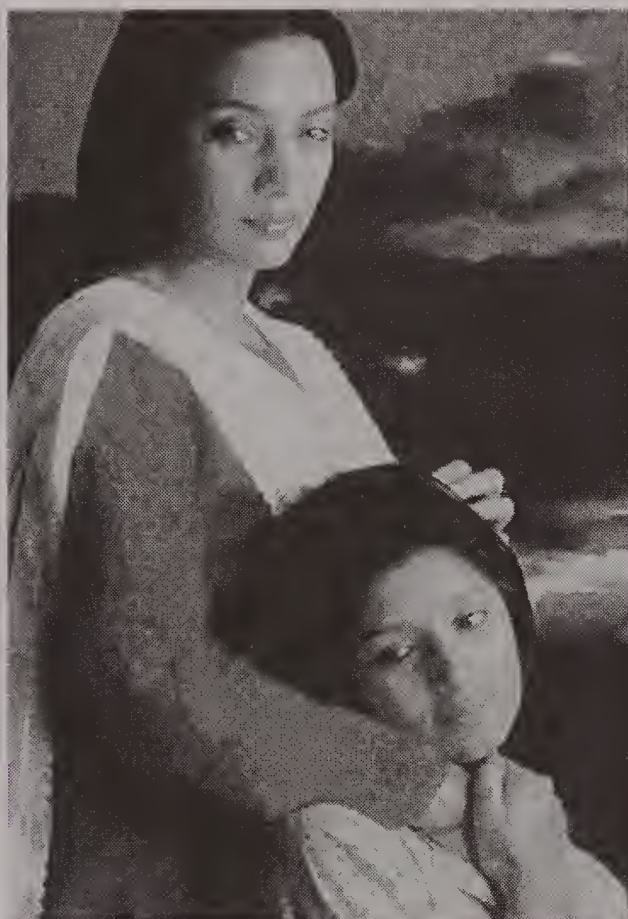
Geeta: She did make a film. I've gone back and forth thinking about her public interviews. The last thing that was written of this kind, that spoke sexuality between women in a household, closed off from the outside (yet porous in necessary ways) was cited for

obscenity—Ismat Chughtai's short story "Lihaaf." The moment I saw this film I thought it had to be paired with "Lihaaf," and so might well provoke the same sort of anger that "Lihaaf" did. I have taught the two texts—film and fiction together. When Shabana Azmi (Radha) printed her open letter in the Times of India in December, she mentioned "Lihaaf" too.

Precisely because of the names Mehta picked, the repetition of the Ramayana, it's the resonance with notions of good citizenship that suggests that there might be trouble, but then again there might not have been. The Ramayana is a text that is associated (by Gandhi among other people) with Ramarajya, the perfect kingdom, the kingdom of god where good men, or men who live a life permeated by ethical action (*charitra*) live. The Ramayana thus becomes the allegory for a good nation/state, and Rama the epitome of a good citizen leader. By focusing the film on the most troubling part of the epic, Rama's struggle over his wife's chastity, and her subsequent trial by fire and expulsion from the good state, Mehta asks us to reconsider *for whom* is this kind of *raj* (kingdom) one ruled by ethics. Rama was asked to choose between his wife and his subjects—who raised the issue of Sita's chastity. In opting for his subjects' point of view, Rama condemns his wife. The wife is thus excluded (in the implicit cri-



Geeta Patel



***Fire* shows us tradition as something necessary to the organization of a middle class household, shows us the forms of seemingly acceptable desire in this household, shows us the assumptions of safety woven into a “traditional” household, and then uses (queer) desire to undo the whole range of assumptions codified into the household.**

tique that Mehta provides) from the rights of citizenship, the right to adequate justice. This critique of a certain notion of a perfect state folded into myth, is one that I expected to make people angry. Angry not because the critique was spoken on the surface of the film’s plot, but angry because it was nestled in another story, that of desire between women. This is a film that is in English but located in idioms of a particular kind of household, shot in the colors of the Indian flag. The film certainly would get people thinking and talking.

The BJP is a national party that has come to represent, articulate and embody a right-wing Hindu nationalist politics. It is affiliated with the Shiv Sena, the group that initially went after *Fire*. I had surmised that since the BJP was in power there would be a backlash against the film. The BJP (and its political affiliates) have targeted many cultural artifacts that they deem inappropriate for a range of reasons. Many people in the feminist movement were waiting for the BJP to censor cultural production, organizing against it the moment the BJP came to power. The film had already played for 3 weeks in Bombay before the Shiv Sena decided to publicly attack it.

What happened around *Fire* must be considered in the context of what else has been happening politically

in India—in the context of a local political economy. One of the things that happened before the explosions over the film is that the BJP lost several major elections. Also, there was a struggle between the BJP and more right-wing RSS over the issue of foreign investment in insurance companies that have been publicly owned. The Shiv Sena’s chief, Bal Thakeray, explicitly said that he didn’t want the Pakistani cricket team to come to play in India. A very big deal. There was a call to demand the Vande Mataram be sung in schools in Uttar Pradesh. Then several right-wing organizations were going to converge (lead suicide squads) on a shrine in Karnataka, in South India at which Hindus worshipped and Muslims commemorated the death of a Pir.

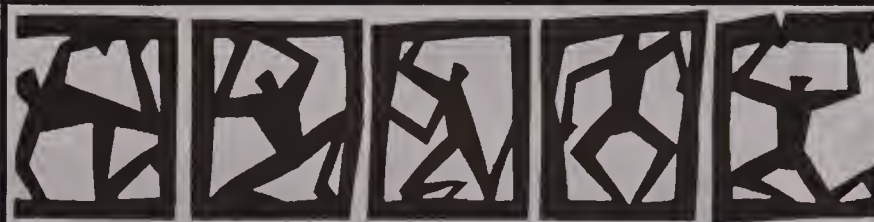
GCN: What qualifies as obscenity in the film?

Geeta: Obscenity is like the pre-nineteenth century European use of sodomy, it’s a slippery term that a lot of things get slotted into. Ismat Chughtai said that what was considered obscene (as against the legal definition of the word) was what men objected to—so for her the word had a huge scope of signification. But in any case, the film is said to be obscene because it’s an unethical portrayal of Indian culture. Some, like Bal Thakeray in a final attempt to get the last word in, say it is obscene

because a Muslim woman plays a Hindu. (Never mind that Shabana Azmi has played many Hindu women in her long and vaunted career.) I think the call for obscenity resides in the very portrayal of the possibility of sexuality in the household—and no less between two women. But remember that the Censor Board passed the film with a request for a name change for Sita—to Nita. That tells you that the issue (even for the censor board) is not merely sex, but the relationship of sex to something else—Sita as the icon, the metonymy, a particular that embodies the whole, of tradition (in the modern), of propriety in the domestic middle class economy of the national. Incidentally the first call of the film censor board, when it was formed by the British in 1920, was to adjudicate and restrict representations (including of rampant sexuality) that might lead the colonized to rebellion (by not obeying the moral imperatives of the colonizers, those people whose foibles and sexual vagaries, represented on screen, showed them to be fallible and not perfect moral arbiters. The film never says lesbian, never uses the word, one might think the word, the film lends itself in several scenes to thinking lesbian (there is no word for it in our languages, says one of the women). But to say that the film is a “lesbian” one would be to place the film in a certain global sexual economy. Not a problem, certainly, and one that is well within the provenance of Mehta’s explorations of global video culture in the film. But even as one says that *Fire* is a “lesbian” film, one must account for the politics of such an identification. Mehta has said over and over again that *Fire* is not a lesbian film. It is a film about sexuality between women, but it is not set up to be about companionate marriage, a lesbian global movement, or sex between two women who have autonomous lives. Of course, one could very well refuse the companionate marriage definition of sexuality, and resignify lesbian to include the representations of sexuality in *Fire*—and why not?

GCN: How have feminists organized to support the showing of the film?

Geeta: It’s a question of what gets reported where. Feminist groups have come out against the Shiv Sena.



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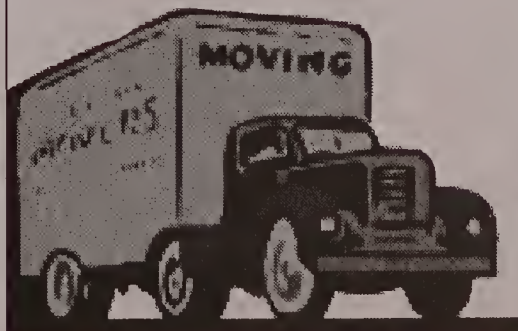
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Geeta Patel



Protestors destroy *Fire* posters

Feminists in Bombay got it together to fund a poster, and to put up 20,000 posters, but their ability to do this was disrupted. First they couldn't get someone to print it, then the printer that agreed wouldn't identify on the poster where it was printed, then the people who poster for money refused the work. Feminist groups (and lesbian groups) demonstrated in front of the Regal cinema in Delhi. Feminists and lesbian groups have issued press releases, and other publicity and held demonstrations. One was held in January in front of the consulate in New York. Newspapers report only the most visible and spectacular instances of organizing, but a great deal has been going on that never gets narrated in press accounts.

GCN: What happens now that the film has been sent back to the Censor Board?

Geeta: There is nothing you can censor in the film. The irony that others have pointed out is that if

you wanted to censor something, the only thing available to your scissors would be the scene of the two women in bed. But even if this scene were cut, the film would still be dangerous. The Shiv Sena is trying to use the Censor Board in a way that is inappropriate to its task. The Censor can only cut footage, they can't stop the film from being shown. The underpinning of what the Censor Board does is to ensure that people won't be encouraged to turn to immoral activities or shown something immoral.

Most Recent Stories On *Fire*

GCN: Have the issues raised by the Shiv Sena become a national, political debate—that is, are members of parliament involved?

Geeta: Members of parliament are addressing the issues of the destruction of theaters and even the demonstration in front of Dilip Kumar's house who is a powerful figure in film and has been at the

forefront of the petition to the Supreme Court. The Shiv Sena's response to Kumar was to take off their clothes in front of his house. The writ that has been filed with the Supreme Court states the fundamental right of the filmmaker to not be strangled by acts of violence against the movie and seeks the appointment of an agency to probe these acts of violence against the theaters in Delhi and Bombay.

In Parliament, the BJP objected to using the name Radha which "hurts the sentiments of the people." What is happening to this film is linked by people in India to other instances of the BJP shutting down speech, closing off avenues of cultural expression. So the discussion is not just about sexuality between women, but that certain forms of sexuality are considered beyond the pale and that producing such exclusions—the abject, the rejected, the thrown out—is in relation to other things thrown out as well. The BJP is picking up on

this, asking: Is it in fashion to abuse Hindu culture? Demonstrations against the violence done to the film, demonstrations by cultural producers, feminists, lesbian groups, regular folks on the street, link what has been done to *Fire* with other attempts by the right-wing to shut down cultural, social and political productions.

GCN: When I think about the US, the most recent production attacked was Terence McNalley's play, *Corpus Christi*, but that went nowhere. However the Mapplethorpe exhibit as it traveled around the US did confront different local responses. In Cincinnati, the city council shut it down on the basis that it fell outside community standards, morals. Is this similar?

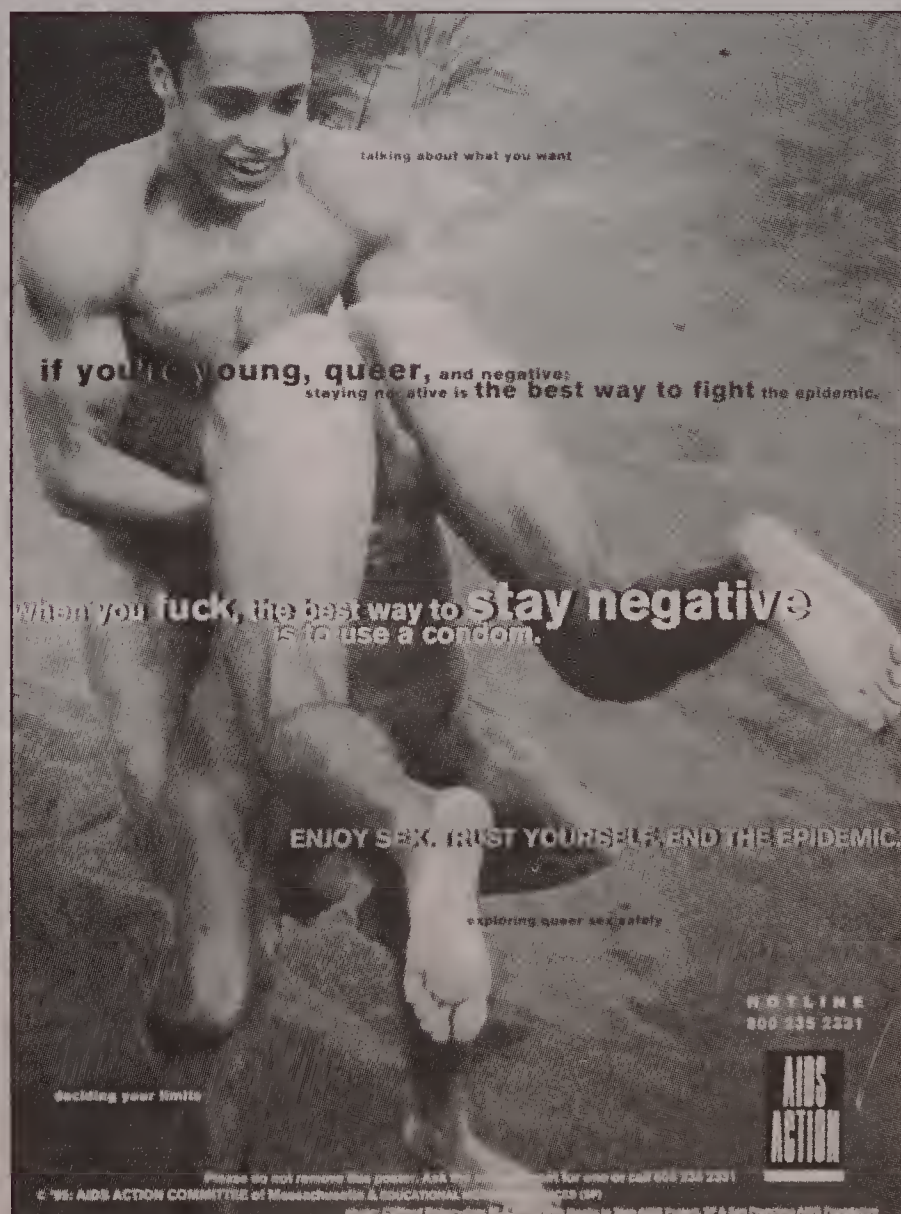
Geeta: The issues are both local and national. The people filing the writ are taking it to the national scene. One of the actresses is a member of Parliament. It could have been left local, perhaps if the BJP had no power. But this is happening at a time when the BJP is in power, but is losing power in the states, and they have been trying to shut down other cultural productions in the name of morality, obscenity and Hindu culture. So it became a part of a national discussion.

I have never seen a debate like this in the US, at least in the past ten years. You would need people in Congress, who are not queer, to

stand up against such attacks. The *New York Times* hasn't had an article talking about the Right trying to shut down cultural production in the US. The rhetorical force deployed against the Shiv Sena and against the BJP, a rhetorical force you see even in newspaper accounts in India, is one seldom used in the US in such a populist form. One of the more recent articles in the *Times of India* talked about a range of "regular folks," a dentist, a lawyer, a feminist, a twelfth grade kid, who have volunteered to sneak out at night and put up posters (funded by feminist organizations) as well as con-

tribute to printing more posters. I have rarely seen in the US representations of this kind of grassroots support for the right to make and view cultural productions that the right-wing has deemed obscene. The death of Matthew Shepard is one rare example of populist rage against violence, but it was not rage against the violence done to art in the name of religion.

Geeta Patel is an Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at Wellesley College. Her forthcoming book from Stanford University Press, a queer reading of Miraji is titled, *Miraji: Poetry in Motion*.



Simon Nkoli

The Legacy of Simon Nkoli:



SOUTH AFRICAN FREEDOM FIGHTER 1957-1998

by Zackie Achmat

On the eve of World AIDS Day, 30 November 1998, the African lesbian and gay movement lost a freedom fighter, leader and activist to HIV/AIDS. Simon Nkoli, a founder and leader of the lesbian and gay movement in South Africa was buried in the township of Sebokeng—the site of mass struggles during apartheid where he was an activist. His coffin contained a cross—he was Christian. The Rainbow flag—a symbol of freedom and diversity as well as lesbian and gay equality—was draped around the coffin. Red ribbons signifying AIDS activism adorned several wreaths. And, the traditional symbol of burial in many African communities—the skin of a freshly slaughtered head of cattle fed to mourners—accompanied Nkoli's body to his ancestral shades.

Who was Simon Nkoli? Why is he mourned and remembered by the international lesbian and gay movement? Most now know that South Africa is the first country in the world to grant constitutional equality to lesbian and gay people and some know that Nkoli played a prominent role in securing our equal status. But his struggle for gay and lesbian liberation emerged from and remained tied to the fight against apartheid and for economic and social justice.

The Apartheid Years

Tseko Simon Nkoli was born on

26 November 1957 to Mrs. Elizabeth and the late Mr. Elias Nkoli in Phiri, Soweto. Later, the Nkoli family moved to Bophelong. Simon has two sisters, Mamoipone and Maputso and a brother Oupa.

In his early years, Si (as he was known to his friends) confronted apartheid through poverty and the infamous pass laws (regulating the movement of Black South Africans). As a young child, Simon hid his parents from the South African Police because they were regarded as “illegal” squatters. These memories guided his struggle for national liberation and sexual freedom.

The activism, heroism and energy of the youth movement were central to Simon Nkoli’s political awareness and leadership. Simon became a student activist and leader in the midst of the 1976 Soweto uprising when police gunned down hundreds of youth protesting that their studies were in Afrikaans. After

Nkoli Detained: The Delmas Treason Trial

When the National Party government and PW Botha attempted to use black councilors as apartheid collaborators to increase rents and attack the living standards of the poor, residents organized stayaways, consumer and rent boycotts. Simon helped organize and support these struggles. For that he was to suffer detention, torture and imprisonment.

In 1984, Tseko Simon Nkoli and 21 fellow comrades (the Vaal 22) were arrested for treason and murder. What followed was the Delmas Treason Trial that included UDF and ANC leaders such as Terror Lekota, Popo Molefe, Tom Manthata, Gcina Malindi and Moss Chikane. These comrades spent more than 4 years on trial for their lives; some were found guilty in December 1988.

During their detention, Simon Nkoli faced a trial that changed the face of lesbian and gay politics in

[Simon Nkoli] gave all progressive activists, but, especially African and Colored activists the courage to come out within the liberation movements.

that, Simon was subjected to repeated questioning and harassment by the Security Police.

In 1979, Simon joined the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and became the general-secretary of the Vaal Triangle. At that time, COSAS led high school students throughout South Africa in our battle against apartheid education. They campaigned for textbooks, teachers and made students aware of the struggle for liberation. Here Simon learned that the day-to-day issues of poor people had to be fought as part of the demands for liberation. In 1982, he played a key role in the formation of Youth Congresses in Soweto and the Vaal.

As with many activists of his generation, Simon Nkoli supported and later joined the African National Congress (ANC). Then it was dangerous and required courage to do so. He was an active member of the United Democratic Front (the UDF) in the 1980s. He remained a member of the ANC until his death.

Southern Africa. He came out as a gay man; his alibi was that he was at a meeting of lesbians and gays. During many months of debate and discussion with his comrades and lawyers, Simon convinced the senior UDF and ANC leaders that lesbian and gay people faced discrimination. He confronted and destroyed the argument that only white men were gay.

Across the world, lesbian and gay people rallied to support Simon Nkoli and the Delmas Treason Trialists. In South Africa, the white-led gay and lesbian movement disowned Simon Nkoli and the struggle against apartheid. Simon Nkoli’s courageous stand at the trial left us a legacy. He gave all progressive activists, but, especially African and Colored activists the courage to come out within the liberation movements. The growth of a lesbian and gay movement on the continent in Africa owes much to Simon Nkoli, Linda Ncgobo, British Gcxabai—all our gay martyrs.

Simon Nkoli

After the Delmas Treason Trial a new tradition emerged. Simon Nkoli and his comrades founded GLOW (Gay and Lesbian Organization of Witwatersrand) in 1989 as the first mass black township-based organization of lesbian and gay people. GLOW was non-racial and supported the African National Congress.

Ten years ago, Simon Nkoli and his comrades organized and led the first lesbian and gay Pride March in Southern Africa. The streets of Johannesburg resounded with Simon's voice as he led the chants—"Out of Closets into the Streets" and "Not the Church, Not the State, We Ourselves Decide Our Fate." GLOW became home to youth who were rejected and despised in our communities and the model for ABIGALE, PEGLO and other black-led township based organizations

The Fight Against HIV/AIDS

Today, South Africans are dying because of treatable or preventable AIDS-related illnesses. The unaffordable costs of health care and medication result in premature deaths. A new front has opened up. Edwin Cameron, then a human rights lawyer, warned that HIV/AIDS will become the new apartheid. As the epidemic developed in South Africa, the lesbian and gay communities and activists mobilized. Sheila Lapinsky, John Pegge, Peter Taylor and others organized safer sex workshops, care and counseling for gay men. Their efforts focused on urban and particularly middle class white men. Once again, Simon Nkoli, Peter Busse, Alfred Machela and other comrades mobilized—the Township AIDS Project was born. The National Party government neglected the

Nkoli and other ANC activists changed the liberation movement's understanding of equality and sexual orientation.

Simon fused the struggles of lesbian and gay people in Southern Africa with the international movement for equality. The Pride March is a monument to Simon Nkoli's belief that lesbian and gay people have to stand up and defend our rights. Thus when Winnie Madikizela-Mandela presented a homophobic defense in her trial, GLOW, as part of the democratic movement and under Simon's leadership, condemned her homophobia.

Post-Apartheid

Nkoli and other ANC activists changed the liberation movement's understanding of equality and sexual orientation. The lesbian and gay movement was fractured, male and white dominated; but, the movement for democracy united poor and rich, white and black, youth and elders, lesbian and straight, rural and urban. That united movement, of which Nkoli and many lesbian and gay activists were an integral part, guaranteed the sexual orientation provision in the Bill of Rights.

gay and black communities in the HIV/AIDS epidemic; but following the example of the Gay Alliance of South Africa 6010, OLGA and the international lesbian and gay movement, Simon and his comrades conducted safer sex workshops, spread materials, and campaigned for treatment.

Simon Nkoli lived with HIV/AIDS for more than 12 years. But after many years, Simon took on another burden and decided to live openly with HIV/AIDS. There are more than 3 million people in our country with HIV/AIDS and Simon Nkoli was one of the very few who said: "HIV is a virus—not a shame."

Global Relations

Institutions of lesbian and gay power across Europe and N. America in the form of clubs; counseling, health, social and legal services; the sex industry; cultural production; educational services and a myriad of economic, political and social networks have in the main developed apart from movements of the poor and marginalized.

In Africa, Asia and Latin America—poor lesbian and gay people form part of the poor majorities. In South Africa, more than two thirds of the employed earn less than US\$300.00 per month. This meager starvation income is used to support more than 5 million unemployed people in the absence of any social security. Social movements and institutions of civil society play an important role in the struggle for economic justice.

The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) in South Africa has for the first time created a national network that is non-racial, black-led and managed. It has fewer than 80 groups—sports, political, religious, cultural, health—affiliated. The Pride Parade, a major NCGLE affiliate attracted only fifteen thousand participants in 1998. For the first time, women constituted half of the committee and black people nearly one-third of the Parade itself. In Zimbabwe, GALZ organized 350 courageous people to march under its banner on International Human Rights Day. Lesbian and gay organizations are fragile and tenuous. Democracy is constantly undermined by social and economic realities that keep society's poor marginalized and encourage corruption among elites.

In this context—the legacy of Simon Nkoli; the legacy of the Delmas Treason Trial; the legacy of Stonewall—pride, affirmation and assertion are combined with human rights, freedom and equality for all people. A lesbian and gay movement that implements a pro-poor agenda is not a point for discussion—it affects vast majorities of people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A policy that is pro-feminist asserts gender equality in societies that subordinate women to men. Racism and colonial conquest have created a legacy that still subjugates the majority of our people. Democratic rights are often the only means that the people have to claim social and economic rights—here, democratic rights are a daily battle for a free press, posters, the right to assemble, opposition to civil war and genocide. Lesbian and gay equality challenge the integrity of social movements. Social movements challenge the integrity of lesbian and gay organizations.

THE ROAD FORWARD

International solidarity was crucial to Simon Nkoli's work and crusade in life. Today, we have to interrogate the nature of internationalism and globalization: Are European and North American activists prepared to be critical of our practices, or, do they patronize us? A paucity of knowledge, cultural production, theoretical concepts and political leadership still characterizes the South African lesbian and gay movement. Can debate enrich our joint work, or, will European and American scholars anthropologize our movements in the "South" and ignore their own responsibilities to poor and marginalized communities at home?

Are African, Asian and Latin American organizations and activists aware of our responsibility, materially and politically, towards North America and Europe, or is the only voice we raise that of the victimized, poor relative who begs for alms? Even ten cents towards a fund for Matthew Shepard by youth in Soweto, or, a small leaflet to educate school youth on the murder is worth more than one of us attending a conference abroad?

Simon Nkoli fought to bring the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) Conference to South Africa. In his memory, African activists need to assert our dignity and claim the legacy of the Delmas Treason Trial. As a complementary tradition to Stonewall, the Delmas Treason Trial shows that lesbian and gay equality is integrally linked to struggles for bread, condoms and freedom around the world!

Zackie Achmat is the Director of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and a member of the Treatment Action Campaign of NAPWA (SA).



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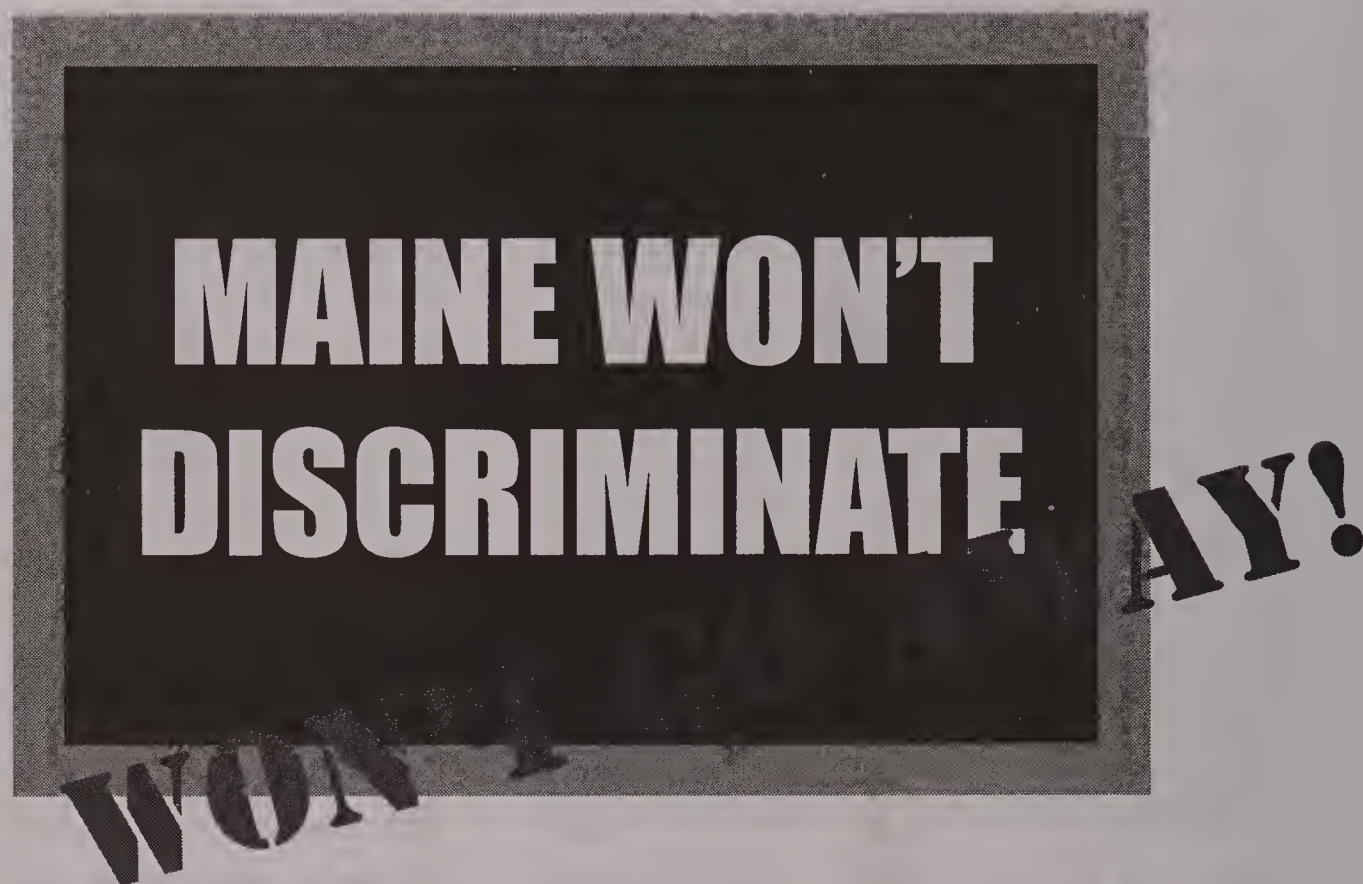
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THERESA J. CREEDEN, CPA

Kimberly Jean Smith



by Kimberly Jean Smith

There was a sense of frustration in the room. More than 70 people from across the state had gathered in a Bangor church on Nov. 15 to decide the next step in the civil rights battle for Maine's gay men and lesbians. But behind the polite discussions of political strategy, there was a barely concealed tension.

One activist sliced the room in half with her hand. "In fact, there's a definite [divide]," she said. On one side were the representatives of Maine Won't Discriminate (MWD), the organization that led two previous civil rights campaigns—the most recent of which ended in a stunning and painful defeat.

Folding her hands in her lap, the activist finished her thought. "Then," she said, "there's the rest of us." The woman was one among

many, both at the Bangor meeting and out in the trenches, who charge MWD needs to be more accountable to the people who helped create it.

Grassroots activists don't yet know what role the group will play in the next battle for an anti-discrimination law, but they say their participation in any new campaign would depend on how responsive MWD is to concerns about its autocratic style and top-down

management. Many of the organizers who called the November meeting fear that MWD—with its brand-name recognition, connections to top political leaders and ability to generate income through a first-rate mailing list—has hijacked the movement and is now more concerned with courting the goodwill of powerful politicians than with improving the lives of gay men and lesbians in Maine.

The growing split between MWD's board of directors and volunteers has caught the attention of political leaders who support gay rights. "I'm not trying to detract from Maine Won't Discriminate," said state Rep. Elizabeth Watson of Farmingdale. "I think this is a time for other groups to feel empow-



ered.... For Maine Won't Discriminate to make some arbitrary decision based on what they want to do without input from some sort of broad-based group would be a recipe for disaster." Others are even more blunt. Larry Bliss, a South Portland activist who helped found MWD before becoming estranged from the organization, characterizes the group as undemocratic, out of touch, cliquish, blind to criticism and patronizing to the hundreds of volunteers that helped build it. "It frustrates me," Bliss said, "that this particular group is so secretive and closed mouth."

MWD's political skills seem to be incredibly dull, and it can be wildly out of touch with the people

it claims to represent. The group waged an inept, failed campaign last winter to prevent the state's new gay rights law from being overturned, failing to listen to grassroots activists and refusing to respond to homophobic myths pushed by the religious right. Since then, MWD's leaders have argued passionately that the next step in the civil rights battle should be to run a massive petition drive to put an anti-discrimination bill on the ballot in 2000.

But when the grassroots activists gathered in Bangor, more than 80 percent voted to squash MWD's plan. They opted instead to call on legislators to again enact the law, this time with a provision to send it to referendum in two

years. Now the activists have no choice but to wait and see if MWD heeds their message—or plunges ahead with a petition drive.

Trying To Follow The Money

Not only did Maine Won't Discriminate lose the February 10 referendum, but it appears to have blundered repeatedly during the 1998 legislative races. In October, the slick statewide organization competed against a small group of civil rights activists in South Portland by sending out a fundraising letter for state Legislature candidates while the local group was pleading for help to pass an equal protection ordinance. That left some in the gay community feeling betrayed by MWD.

Kimberly Jean Smith

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"There is a community trust there that's faltering," said Susan Farnsworth, a civil rights activist, lawyer and former state representative. "I can see why legislators in general would not be comfortable with the conflict continuing."

Though some in Augusta may be growing wary of the group, that didn't stop MWD from trying to buy the goodwill of more than 40 candidates by laying out at least \$17,000 in campaign contributions this fall. Ethan Strimling, one of MWD's leaders, said the organization gave money to politicians who have voiced support for equal rights.

But in fact, MWD turned away plenty of civil rights supporters—and wasted money in races where both candidates were already strong advocates of gay rights. In at least one case, the group gave funds to a candidate whom other civil rights groups opposed.

Strimling was the only MWD leader who agreed to talk to CBW about the donations. Pat Peard, a founding member, did not return phone calls. And director Karen Geraghty canceled an interview before turning the task over to Strimling. According to Strimling, MWD chose candidates to help based on advice from leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as its own

political expertise. We "weighed all the odds," he said, "and said, who's really been there for us." MWD's list of beneficiaries included politicians with deep pockets, like Joel Abromson, an incumbent Republican state senator from Portland, who outspent his losing Democratic rival, Boyd Marley, by more than four to one. Both candidates supported civil rights, but that didn't stop MWD from handing \$250 to Abromson. It's hard to figure what the group got for its money. Abromson was far from likely to change his mind about backing gay rights, and was even less likely to lose his seat. Strimling said the group just felt it owed the candidate a hand, because "he's been a huge supporter."

Strimling couldn't recall why the group gave \$100 to Phil Harriman, an incumbent GOP senator from Yarmouth. But in doing so it opposed the decision of the Dirigo Alliance, a coalition of liberal groups that includes the Maine Lesbian/Gay Political Alliance. Dirigo chose to support Harriman's opponent, Beth Edmonds. Oddly enough, Dirigo's executive director, George Christie, is also a board member of MWD.

James Skoglund, Democratic state representative from St. George, got \$200 from MWD. Skoglund said he didn't ask for the money, didn't need it and won his race without it because he passed the cash on to a more needy candidate.

While Skoglund's coffers were brimming, B. Nolan McCoy of South Portland was begging MWD for some help with his struggling legislative campaign. McCoy, who is openly gay, ran against Republican state representative Peter Cianchette, who has a mixed record on gay rights. Strimling didn't know why the group decided to stay out of that race. "I can't remember," he said.

It's A Pac, Stupid

Some activists say Maine Won't Discriminate's authoritarian structure and routine dismissal of local organizers' input resulted in February's loss. And some legislators who support the group's aims now worry it may not have enough backing from the community it claims to represent. Strimling said he believes those criticisms are typical of the kind of gripes that follow any

political campaign, especially a losing one. "I'm not sure that it's healthy or not healthy," he said. "But it happens." MWD's bulging bank account and tight connections with top political leaders show the group has all the support it needs, Strimling said, noting that the organization hoped to gather \$15,000 from its most recent fundraising efforts, but netted closer to \$30,000. "Tons of people are out there giving," he said. "Everybody is just incredibly supportive of the work we are doing."

The average Mainer who favors gay rights may in fact be sending cash to MWD, but the hardworking activists on whom the organization depends say they're growing increasingly unhappy with the group they helped to found.

Dorothy Meriwether, who headed MWD's Knox County chapter during its first campaign in 1995, said the community's complaints can't be explained away simply as dissatisfaction with February's defeat. "I was so demoralized by the treatment I received [in 1995]," she said, recalling the patronizing attitude she encountered when dealing with the Portland-based leaders. "I definitely believe that there is something more at stake here than just bitterness."

Haggling over the best strategy for winning civil rights is nothing new. National groups calling for equal protection at the federal level have recently clashed with grassroots activists, who complain that high profile campaigns are too authoritarian and media-driven. In Maine, the dissent has already taken a toll on the gay rights movement. When MWD went looking for local activists to help with the February referendum battle, organizers found some county chapters had disbanded, leaving them little means for getting out their message in rural parts of the state. Critics of MWD worry the group may fail in 2000 if leaders don't find a way to win back support from rank-and-file volunteers: "On a statewide campaign you need some diversity of opinion," said Mike Mayo, a leader of Midcoast for Human Rights, a civil rights group that split from MWD. "You need to have somebody there that has some questions or doubt."

Strimling said people who complain that the organization is undemocratic are missing the point. When

MWD was established, it was structured as a political action committee, which means the group doesn't have to answer to a broad membership. Technically, all decisions can be made by its board of directors, who are not elected but appointed by one another. Currently, MWD is in the hands of eight people with strong ties to the state's political leadership. Strimling is the executive director of the Portland West Neighborhood Planning Council, a nonprofit organization that provides housing and social services. He's also been active in campaigns for Democratic candidates. Board members include Geraghty, a Portland city councilor; Peard, a local attorney; Dale McCormick, the state treasurer; Jessica Steward, a longtime activist; Betsy Sweet, a professional lobbyist and consultant; Christie, Dirigo's director; and Peter Chandler, who is an executive assistant to the president of the state Senate.

When the group needs advice about how to move forward, Strimling said it turns to its allies in the Legislature and other political experts. But to launch a new statewide campaign, he knows MWD will need volunteers like those who met in the Bangor church.

Marching To War Without Any Troops

Like much of the gay rights community, MWD argues that a statewide law should be the ultimate goal. But the group is so intent on that prize that it has ignored or hampered efforts to win local protections, reportedly discouraging organizers in Brunswick from trying to pass a civil rights ordinance there.

Other activists are disappointed that MWD hasn't gotten involved in towns like Falmouth and Camden, where votes on equal protection are expected next year. Despite its reputation for blundering, MWD's refusal to help with those battles for local ordinances may have hurt the entire movement, some say, pointing out that the nine-vote defeat of Ogunquit's gay rights measure in November could have been avoided if MWD had lent some expertise.

Some activists in South Portland say MWD nearly sabotaged their local campaign. South Portland Citizens for Justice was thrown into the fight for a civil rights

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ordinance when a well-intentioned city councilor failed to convince his colleagues to pass such a measure. Instead, the law was sent out to referendum. South Portland activists were still reeling from the February loss, and weren't ready to mount a new campaign. Still, they knew a defeat in South Portland could have a demoralizing effect across the state.

They were shocked when they discovered MWD was raising funds for candidates even as their own pleas for support hit mailboxes. In some cases the two groups were competing for the same donors. Deepening the insult, MWD sent the fundraising plea in envelopes that carried its slogan from February's vote "No on 1." South Portland organizers had spent months explaining that in the local vote supporters needed to cast an affirmative ballot.

One South Portland organizer complained, "I think we were beyond [MWD's] concern."

Strimling concedes sending the fundraising plea in "No on 1" envelopes was probably a mistake. "That was definitely an oversight," he said. "We should have thought about it." But concerns that his group's fundraising pleas hurt local organizers' efforts are groundless, he said, because MWD only sent the letter to 53 South Portland residents and raised just \$40 from that city. He said MWD eventually offered the justice group \$1,000 and helped it set up a phone bank.

STRIMLING SAID PEOPLE WHO COMPLAIN THAT [MAINE WON'T DISCRIMINATE] IS UNDEMOCRATIC ARE MISSING THE POINT. [A]S A POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE, THE GROUP DOESN'T HAVE TO ANSWER TO A BROAD MEMBERSHIP. TECHNICALLY, ALL DECISIONS CAN BE MADE BY ITS BOARD OF DIRECTORS, WHO ARE NOT ELECTED BUT APPOINTED BY ONE ANOTHER.

South Portland organizers dispute the amount of help they got, and say MWD should learn from their victory that campaigns aren't won solely by expensive advertising, extensive polling or costly consultants. Civil rights activists need to "put everything behind us and use the lessons we are learning on a local level," said David Swander, a South Portland Citizens for Justice member. "The lesson that we learned in South Portland is that education and dialogue are what get the votes out."

But MWD continues to believe in a campaign strategy built on telephone polling and television ads. "Polls, they tell you what's going on," said Strimling. "They tell you what people feel." Activists, for their part, blame MWD's dependence on "scientific campaigning" for the February defeat, saying leaders should have helped volunteers counter the homophobic myths about "special rights."

Mayo of Midcoast for Human Rights said part of the problem was caused by bad advice from out-of-state consultants. "I think

they were all well-intentioned," he said, "but not exactly aware of the way things work back in Maine."

During the '95 campaign, consultants from national gay and lesbian organizations headquartered in Washington, DC, told Mayo to go organize the gay neighborhoods in his hometown of Thomaston, where, needless to say, there are no gay neighborhoods. Mayo said he later came to believe both MWD and its national advisors were more concerned with winning than with making life better for gay men and lesbians here.

"Any good campaign," Mayo said, "should spend as much time educating communities about gay people's lives as trying to win the election." As he put it, "You can lose a referendum but still gain ground." "Someone from Washington, DC—all they see is the vote. Did you win the vote?" he said. "They don't see any of the impact on the people who live here."

Mayo acknowledges MWD's hard work, but said the organization's powerful, entrenched leader-

ship and Augusta connections make it hard to change the group's direction—or even get information on where it's headed. "God, if you were king, would you feel you had to tell anybody what you were up to?" Mayo asked. "It's an entirely human characteristic I don't think it's difficult to understand."

Farnsworth said she's held her tongue for three years while MWD cooked up a campaign strategy that discouraged activists from responding to opponents' homophobic rhetoric and anti-gay stereotypes. "I'm not going to be quiet any longer about not responding to negative arguments," she said.

"The fear of losing is even greater. The fear [makes it] appropriate to speak up."

Farnsworth and other activists say they're ready to take on MWD's leadership. Rather than silently following mandates handed down by the organization, they want to be part of setting its agenda.

But MWD has given little indication it's ready to change. "People get frustrated," said Strimling. "They want to be included, and very obviously, you can't include everybody."

There's a price to be paid for running a campaign structured exclusively around the ideas of an elite leadership—a leadership that devises what it considers the perfect campaign plan, while ignoring the experience of grassroots activists. As one longtime organiz-

er put it, MWD may indeed have the answer for gaining civil rights for gay men and lesbians, but if the group doesn't learn to listen, there won't be anyone around to put that plan in place.

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Kimberly Jean Smith is a staff writer for the *Casco Bay Weekly* in Portland, Maine. This article first appeared in the *Casco Bay Weekly*, November 26, 1998 and is reprinted with permission.

Susan Raffo

Queering the Welfare Reform

by Susan Raffo

Welfare Reform. Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgendered Organizing. Food Stamps. Gay issues. I am reminded of elementary school exercises in which the student is instructed to match up images and words with other images and words that are similar or equal. As Big Bird sang on Sesame Street, "One of these things is not like the others, one of these things just doesn't belong." Here we have a list of phrases and words that don't often sit in the same sentence. And why not?

Welfare reform and GLBT communities are intimately tied. Unfortunately, this tie is rarely examined, either in GLBT publications or in publications focused on the issues surrounding welfare reform. When any connection between the two is made, it is usually summed up as, well, of course there are GLBT people on welfare. This connection is not wrong. There are GLBT people who receive all kinds of public assistance, including welfare, but the connection is more complicated and pervasive. When GLBT communities and welfare reform are brought together, we get more than a group of individuals who can be somehow separated from the rest of the community because they receive public assistance.

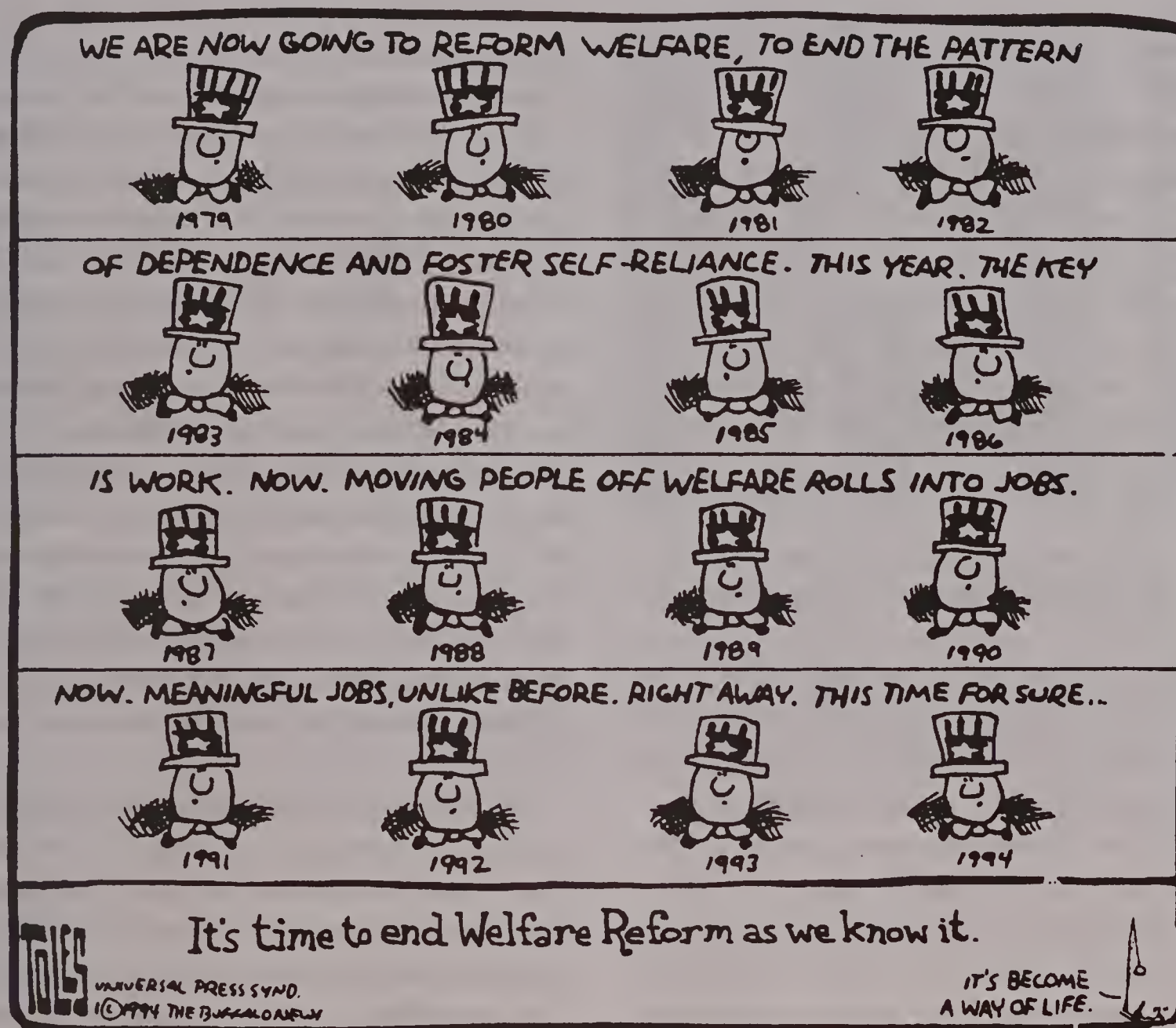
The meanings of a number of hot button words—family, values, community, responsibility, accountability, and punishment—are central to the contemporary debate. Welfare reform is born of the same political climate and perspective that created the Defense of

Marriage Act and the backlash against immigrants. An assortment of others has been employed in the effort to mark out a cultural center, to separate the deserving from the undeserving, the good families from bad, and to identify those demands for "special rights" that inhibit the liberties of those who live decently. Moreover, the Radical Right has less problem drawing parallels between gays and lesbians, welfare mothers, and immigrants than some of these communities' members.

Before examining the relationship between GLBT communities and welfare reform, I want to identify first what the term "welfare reform" means.

What is welfare reform?

"Welfare reform is a specific process that started in the United States Congress in 1995 and 1996," says Rich Wayman, an attorney with Northside Legal Aid. "Conservative elements in the Republican party swept



From Stuart Schram, *Words of Welfare*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

through Congress and brought with them an agenda that rethought the traditional safety net we had attempted to produce in our society since the early part of the 20th century. What you hear about welfare reform today really has to do with Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), called ADC in some other states. Generally, that program was simply terminated. A new system was set up which allows for states to review their own systems and experiences in whatever way they wish." The federal entitlement program was replaced with a system of state block grants.

"[T]here was talk that too many people were abusing the system, you've heard the stereotype about welfare mothers who won't get off the system, who want to have more children to have more income. This was the con-

versation that was being carried on in Congress prior to the reforms," explained Wayman. "These stereotypes are unsupported by any social study or fact. The most recent study in Hennepin County on recipients of AFDC is that the average length of stay was two years. The same goes with the myth about welfare fraud. Studies that have been in existence since the 1960s have found that reported cases are either negligible or nonexistent." However unsupported by fact, these kinds of stories about welfare and welfare recipients fed the national discussion on reform. They focused the discussion on getting people off welfare rather than creating a workable system to help the neediest members of society.

In Minnesota, a new program was established as a result of federal welfare reform, called the Minnesota

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Families Initiative Program (MFIP). Most recipients of MFIP benefits are women and children. Families are still provided with a type of cash safety net, as with the old system, but the role of that money has changed. Before, the safety net was understood to be something that could provide a stable living environment so that families were able to get on with their lives. Now the idea is that a family goes on MFIP to rapidly resolve a crisis and then returns to the workforce. The new system focuses on quick transitions rather than substantive support and is built with incentives to get individuals off benefits as fast as possible.

One of the more controversial elements of welfare reform is the new time limit for recipients. People can only receive benefits for five years (60 months). But, this lifetime limit is inflexible and applies to everyone, regardless of individual circumstance. MFIP's clock began ticking in August, 1997. Once an individual receives benefits for 60 months, they have no additional access to MFIP's services, no matter what their living situation or what events might occur in the future. The person has to find a job that can support their family, live off of charity, or live with extended family members. Nationally, most women leaving welfare are working for poverty wages in jobs without benefits. For most people, the five year limit won't be a problem. Even with the old system, rarely did a family stay in receipt of benefits for 60 months. But there are going to be some whose experiences won't fit the formula. As the newest reforms in welfare are only a year old, there is no way of knowing how many families might still need welfare assistance after the 60 month limit.

Some of the reforms are improvements on the old system. MFIP will provide childcare benefits to families while they're on welfare. And unlike the old system, which made it difficult to transition from welfare to work unless an individual jumped straight into a high paying job with good benefits, MFIP allows more transition between welfare and work. When an individual gets a part time job and begins to earn wages, their total income including benefits is allowed to slowly rise (up to a certain ceiling) as encouragement for working.

Additionally, there are programs aimed at helping victims of domestic violence.

But even with the presence of some positive changes, many are concerned about the overall picture. "Here at Legal Aid, we're concerned about a number of issues," says Wayman, "we're worried that the emphasis on work will create problems because people won't have the skills to hold a proper job or will get in trouble on the job for any number of reasons, get fired, and then get sanctioned. We're worried about what will happen to families and individuals when the economy does take a down turn, as it eventually will. When that happens, people with low training and education are always the first to be cut and the longest to remain unemployed. And finally, what will happen to families after the five year period? Will that lead to a greater demand on non-profits and social service agencies who provide services? Will there continually be greater competition for the same dollars?"

"The government used to feel the need to make sure that all of its citizens were taken care of, the attitude being we're only as strong as our weakest members," explains Ann DeGroot, Executive Director of Outfront Minnesota. "The attitude now is that many people have been taking advantage of the government for way too long and need to be stopped. Increasingly, legislators see themselves as protectors of the treasury rather than as protectors of the common good."

The battle over cultural meaning


"When looking at AFDC and now MFIP," says Wayman, "we're talking about a relatively small amount of money within the overall federal budget. But the meaning of this money has become symbolically very large. And as a result, the conversation about this money and who should get it has grown increasingly complicated." Struggles for political meaning are as old as politics and language. They are strongly present in the political discussions of today.

Welfare reform is a public discussion on the American family. "I think that much of this reform has come into being because of people's biases," says DeGroot, "We still

believe in the US that if you have stuff, that makes you a good person. If someone is poor, that means they aren't really touched by God because God grants the stuff and if someone doesn't have the stuff, well they must not have done what they were supposed to. As a culture, we really do have the belief that if people would just work and then pull themselves up by their proverbial boot straps, they wouldn't be poor. This carries directly into conversations about welfare reform. The attitude is that if a woman needs public assistance to buy food for her children, then she's a bad mother." Underlying much of these reforms and often directly stated during the legislative hearings around welfare reform is that there are good families and there are bad families.

As soon as the word "family" is mentioned, you can be sure that gays and lesbians, bis and trans are not included in the picture. "Maybe we should demand that the definition of family is broader," says Alexa Bradley, Co-Director of the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action, "The nuclear family is being redefined again in which the mother-father-two-kids picture is being used as the family image by corporate America and the Radical Right. Gays and lesbians don't fit this picture but we start to think that if we can just make it two moms or two dads, everything will be ok. I don't believe that's true. Only so far as we are perceived to be a viable market will we be accepted as insiders. And what's worse, we're accepting the definitions of ourselves and our lives as only a market to be invested in rather than a community of people with a lot of different experiences. We increasingly seem to believe that if we have access to the same goods as straight people, then everything is going to be ok."

In the midst of this debate, the rights and even lives of gays and lesbians are hotly contested. "There's an idea that there are people in this country who have been asking for too many special things for too long," continues DeGroot. In 1994, the Traditional Values Coalition produced a video titled "Gay Rights, Special Rights." The tape used two primary strategies to disconnect gay rights movements from other movements for civil rights, particularly the African American Civil Rights



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movement. The first strategy presented as fact that gays and lesbians are generally wealthy, citing statistics that a number of gay marketing groups generated to entice investors. With such economic privilege, the video explained, gays and lesbians don't need any form of extra protection. It is an absurdity to talk about "rights" when gays and lesbians already enjoy a life that few Americans can afford. Isn't this, asked religious and community leaders in video, just the desire for something special, something in addition to the rights available to all Americans? The second strategy was more familiar: gays and lesbians are abominations in the eyes of the Bible and therefore should be shunned rather than protected. Sodomites should not receive rights.

The work of the Radical Right has been successful in placing this idea of special versus deserved rights on the public agenda. Equally successful has been the weaving

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of this discussion of “rights” with discussions of Biblical law. Such a strategy ends up carrying a more righteous kind of authority than a mere focus on interpretations of civil law. The same charge of special rights has been levied against all communities in the United States whose existence is seen as threatening to American traditions and strength, not just the GLBT community. “Special rights are not just seen by the Right as queer rights,” explains DeGroot. “The idea of special rights has been applied to a wide range of circumstances. I heard ‘special rights’ recently applied to the context of any woman asking for any kind of public assistance, from childcare to food stamps to help feed their kids.”

During the legislative hearings for the reform in welfare, women receiving AFDC were often described as shiftless, lazy, undeserving, and parasites on the national economy. The image of welfare mothers as baby factories in pursuit of more and more cash was used to justify the need for massive legislative changes. It is not a coincidence that the image most often used to symbolize the “welfare mother” was an image of a woman of color, often African-American. It didn’t matter that most women in receipt of AFDC were white. The “them” of welfare mothers was better reinforced as something dangerous and something “not like us” by using exam-



ples that would stir the fears and prejudices of white legislators.

The most often held belief, voiced in a number of styles depending on the politics of the speaker, was that people in receipt of benefits were getting something for nothing, something special, something other hard working Americans were not getting. These people, it was stated, do not deserve such special attention.

After all, if someone gets support to feed their kids, then someone else is NOT getting something. Welfare rights ends up equaling special rights. And this gets still more complicated. Welfare reform was also built on a platform against immigration.

“Welfare reform at the federal level has been driven by a national anti-immigrant sentiment,” says Diane Benjamin, Research

Director with the Children's Defense Fund. "The hatred has been intense. You should read some of the testimony during the hearings on welfare reform; it's unbelievable. The anti-immigrant sentiment really drew along much of the welfare reform and slashed immigrants, both legal first generation immigrants and illegals, out of receiving any kind of social benefit. The idea was that immigrants were coming over here and just taking American resources without giving anything back." Benjamin ties this into the larger discussion of special rights and the deserving versus undeserving. "The intensity of this hatred has implications far wider than welfare reform. Anytime we have policy fueled by the hatred of an out group, any other out group should feel worried. Immigrants were targeted during these cuts because the perception was that these immigrants are people 'not like us.' The same rhetoric was used to talk about women on welfare and it is the same rhetoric used to talk about gays and lesbians."

Welfare reforms specific to GLBT service organizations

"Welfare reform is about devolving much of the cost of social services down from the state and federal level to the local level, particularly the county level," says Benjamin. "This means that funding at the county level will be heavily affected by welfare reform. The county will now bear much of the brunt of administering MFIP while working to maintain its previous funding responsibilities. Food shelves, housing shelters, and law enforcement are all county funded services. The county bears the expense of increasing burdens on the services it provides. As the burden on the county increases, other programs will likely be cut. We have already seen this happen. Many GLBT programs receive county funding, from Outfront Minnesota to many of the programs dealing with homeless youth. As the burden pushes down, decisions need to be made and individuals make those decisions. Those individuals might or might not see programming aimed at combating homophobia, serving individuals with HIV/AIDS, or dealing with homeless GLBT youth as being a priority."

The recent reforms in welfare are still new and, in

"There has been a powerful shift in focus, a movement from prioritizing the funding of services to meet the needs of citizens to a focus on policing funding and watching for unnecessary spending. This makes a radical difference in how funding takes place."

Mary Weeks, Executive Director of Minneapolis Youth Diversion

some places, are just being put into place. It's only been recently that data has been available that outlines its impact on individuals and families. The direct result of the transition from AFDC to MFIP is a change in the funds available to individuals and families for the procurement of basic services. The secondary result of the transition from AFDC to MFIP is the effect this reform has on other federally, state, and county funded services. The climate that promoted the changes in welfare also affects the funding of all other services. "There has been a powerful shift in focus," says Mary Weeks, Executive Director of Minneapolis Youth Diversion, "a movement from prioritizing the funding of services to meet the needs of citizens to a focus on policing funding and watching for unnecessary spending. This makes a radical difference in how funding takes place. Often it doesn't." Organizations that provide services for a wide range of individuals and communities are feeling the change on a number of different levels, from how the reform is affecting those who have been depending on public support to how the change

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Ron Suresha

You Can Lead a Bear to Culture but...

or
Talking with
David Bergman and
Michael Bronski

by Ron Suresha

Following separate conversations with two of the leading cultural critics of gay culture—David Bergman and Michael Bronski—I managed to get them on-line together for a discussion of the Bear subculture. We typed furiously for two hours about the good, the bad, and the grizzly—and some of the bristly implications for Bear life specifically, and gay culture in general. Here's an excerpt:

RON: Some consider the Bears to be one of the first movements following the onset of AIDS to provide gay men with healthy images of sex. It was a way, in part, for some men to reconnect with images of strength and power and virility, and to some extent longevity—qualities connected with Bear body traits: beards, fur, fat, and sexual prowess.

MICHAEL: I wonder what you mean by a “movement”—as opposed to a bunch of guys that felt good about how they looked and hung out together which

helped them to have safe sex. That is great, but it is not a “movement” to feel good about sex. Which is not to say that the Bear thing did not come into being and evolve as a response—directly and indirectly—to AIDS.

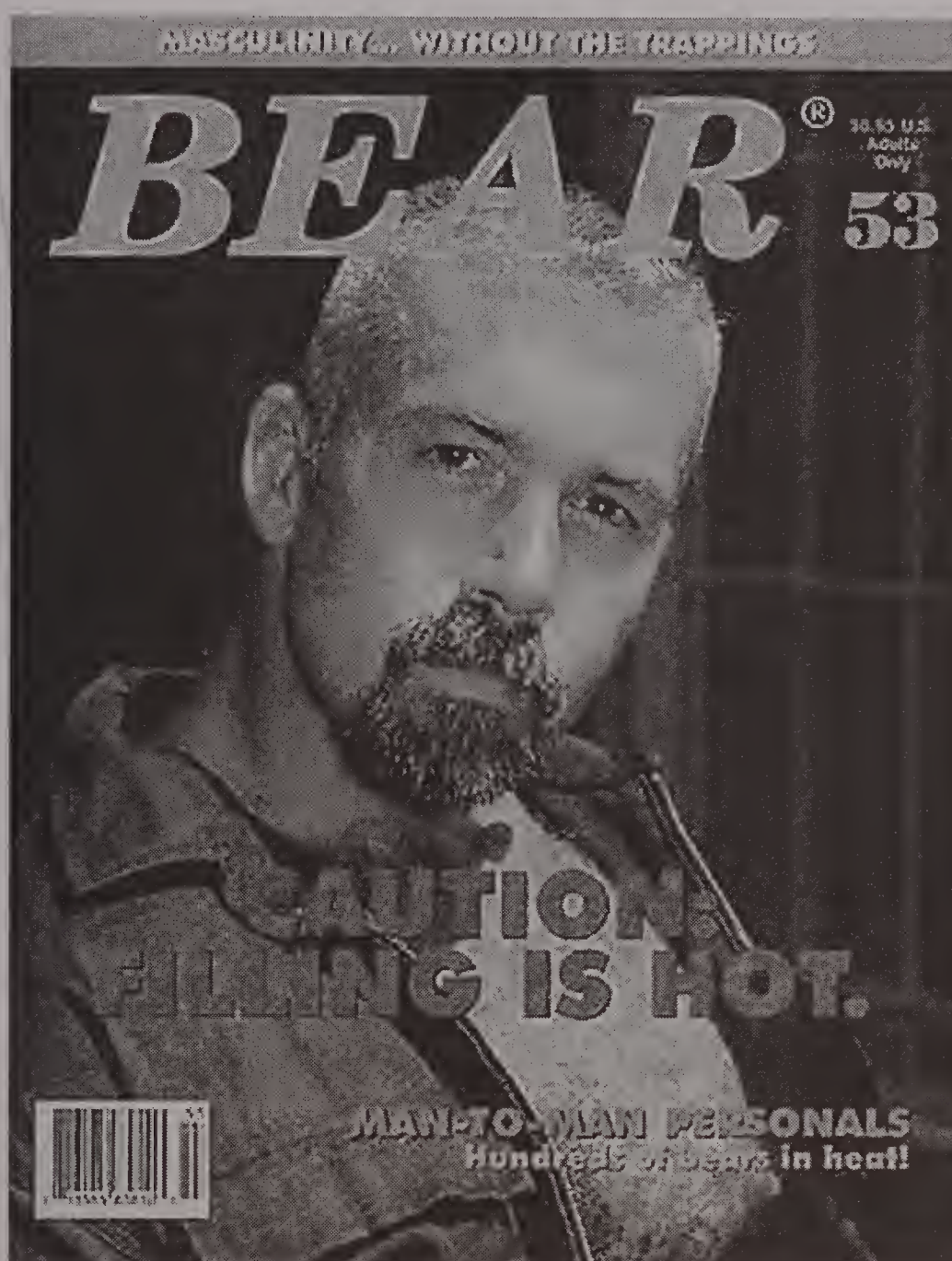
RON: Perhaps not a “movement” in a political sense, but in the way it created community, art, and identity that tens of thousands of men around the world can relate to.

MICHAEL: I would not personally use the phrase “Bear movement.” I rather see it as a “phenomenon”—a sort of varied,

multilevel, mostly grassroots (although increasingly commodified) response to many factors, especially AIDS.

DAVID: I think AIDS is an important part of what brought about the Bear groups, but I think its origins go back further to a desire in certain gay men to find something especially beautiful and sexy in their own masculinity. I think it is also a response to certain cultural images of gay men that gay men produced of themselves which emphasized (perhaps overemphasized): youth, hairlessness, gym bodies, and wealth....

MICHAEL: ...Is the identity of “Bear” simply a reaction to what is experienced as an oppressive gay male culture, or is it something unique in and of itself? This is not a new question. African-American culture has evolved and flourished in resistance to—and been suppressed and harmed by—a dominant culture of white racism. The same is true of gay culture. I don't really see “Bear culture” as that sort of entity or construction, but it is a question if the Bear identity is proactive, or simply reactive. I suspect that the Bear image started out as a reflexive revolt against beauty norms (among other things) but has evolved into a stabilized identity and image that wants to be accepted as mainstream. This, of course, is a contradiction that one sees in the gay movement as well. Are gay people in some way pro-



I would like to see Bears as a force of resistance against the fashion industry, the style industry, and other types of classist ways of separating people.

—David Bergman

Sorry to be cynical, but good luck. If we have seen anything it has been a desire for Bears to become fashionable. What else does Bear Magazine promote?

—Michael Bronski

foundly different, or are we just like everyone else?

RON: This brings up an interesting aspect of Bear representation: how so often urban Bears try to “pass” as straight, working-class Joes (or Harrys, perhaps) yet in reality are just furry technoqueers.

DAVID: My answer is that for the most part we are invisible to straight people. I think most gay people are still seen by the straight world in the old stereotypes. When I mention “bears” to straights who are pretty “cool,” they don’t even know what I’m talking about.

MICHAEL: But do you think

that Bears are at all visible as gay to straight people? They just look like older men. There is nothing gay about the look to those who don’t know.

RON: What impact have the Bears had on queer culture-at-large?

MICHAEL: I don’t think there is a great deal of impact by Bears on gay culture. I think that what we call gay culture is actually an enormous set of overlapping subcultures that have little impact on one another. I do think that the importance of Bears and Bear culture is that it shows that gay culture is

growing and becoming more and more interesting with age. And that is great, it is a sign of maturity.

DAVID: I think with some of my students that they are often more comfortable with a greater range of what it means to be gay, and seem to have a less stereotyped notion of what they have to live up to. That might be a response to Bear culture, but I have never heard them speak of it. They seem to be very oblivious to the idea. In fact the only gay person under thirty that has ever mentioned Bear culture to me is my niece and her girlfriend, who think of themselves as lady Bears.

Ron Suresha

MICHAEL: Gay male culture has an enormous capacity to reinvent and self invent. There is a chapter in *The Pleasure Principle*, my new book, that charts how the gay male body changed how straight men viewed their own bodies. I think that the capacity to invent the Bear has shown straight culture—just as the clone and the daddy and other gay types did—that men can be any number of things. And more importantly that that image can be sexy.

DAVID: Gay men are always showing straight men how to look at themselves. Look at James Dean and any number of gay movie stars who came to represent American maleness.

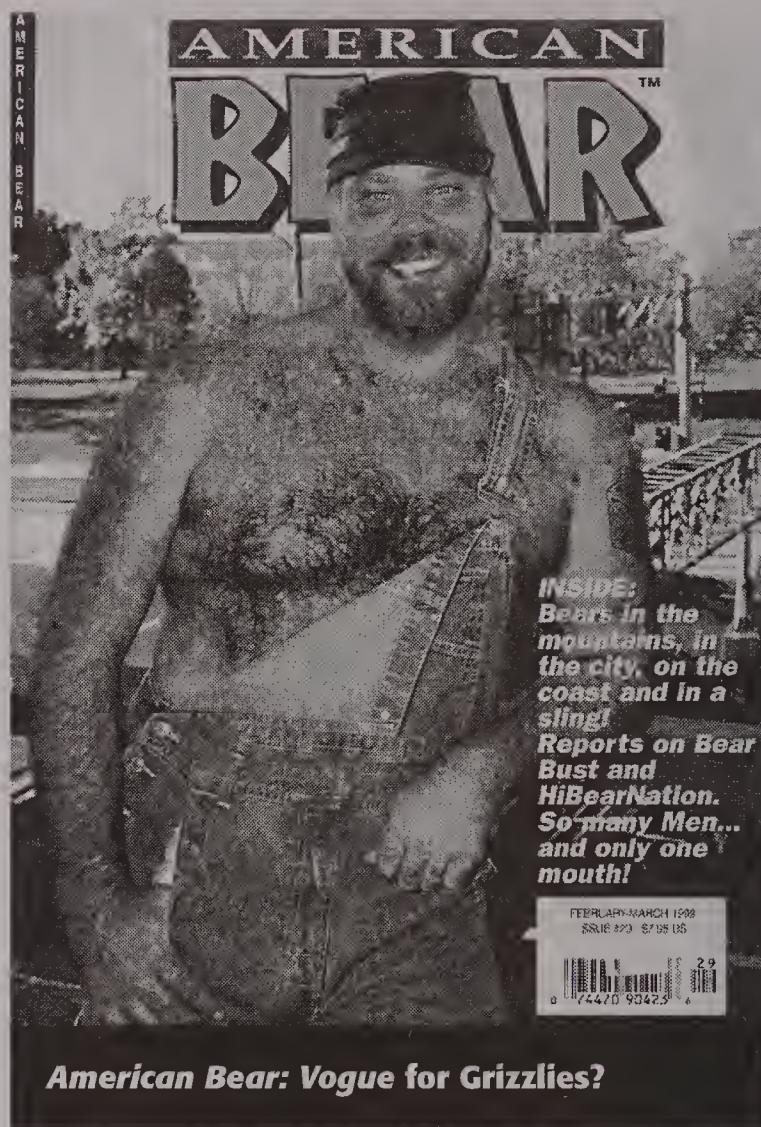
RON: And that's the impact that Bears had—they made visible to the larger gay culture a far greater range of images, and thereby broke through the contemporary gay male beauty code.

MICHAEL: I think that gay men and gay sensibility have usually paved the way for how Americans think about a whole range of body types and images. But this is always complicated. The reality is that the Marlboro Man—as an image, and I suspect as a model—came out of certain gay types of the 1960s and 70s. He can also be seen as a early proto-Bear. But that would not have had the impact it did if it were not connected to a major advertising campaign put together by the cigarette industry. The image may have started out gay, but its effect was through a mainstream venue. The same with James Dean—his was a gay image, but developed through the Hollywood studio system. I think that at this point in history—as with all social trends that are media-influenced—what causes what, is the most interesting question.

RON: You mean, did the individuals who were Bears create the magazine that created the groups and thus the subculture, or some other way around?

MICHAEL: As David said earlier, Bears did not come out of nowhere. And Bears have been commercialized from the beginning. There would be no “movement” without the magazines.

RON: But you stated earlier, Michael, that the Bear zines do not comprise a movement by themselves. You



American Bear: Vogue for Grizzlies?

don't think that the Bear bulletin board groups along with the Bear bars and the Bear Hug groups helped the Bear culture to spread far and fast?

MICHAEL: Sure, the bulletin boards did, but the magazines started it. And kept it going with products and videos, and on and on. It became marketing, like everything else in US. culture. . . . What do Bears really have in common except an attraction to one another and the desire to be in a group of like-minded-bodied people? Which is not a necessarily bad thing—but what do they have in common?

RON: Perhaps they share the same class, or at least the same class values—or the illusion of shared-class values?

MICHAEL: Do you mean class as in economic class? I find that hard to believe. And if you are implying that class value—and I am not sure that means in the context of the US. and its history and economy—are things like not dressing or acting middle-class, that strikes me as, well, superficial, and sort of insulting to working-

class men who have to dress that way because they don't have enough money to dress up. I still wonder what Bears have in common except a body type. Which, again, is a fine thing to have in common. But it seems Bear clubs are like restricted country clubs: No thin people need apply?

RON: But Bears don't necessarily have a common body type. Although I'm trim, I've never felt out of place in a Bear space—at least, not because of my body type. Certainly I've never gone to a Bear event or a Bear space and felt, Oh, I'm not fat enough or hairy enough. In contrast with predominant media images and dance-bar attitudes, you will find people in the Bear groups who are thin, and clean-shaven, and smooth-bodied—just not usually with all of those characteristics.

DAVID: We must distinguish between Bear groups as they are, and how they might be. I would like to see Bears as a force of resis-

tance against the fashion industry, the style industry, and other types of classist ways of separating people. It would be nice to find in the gay world a group whose aim was inclusion, between and among genders. I think that would be the attraction for women to join Bear groups, and it might be a source of attraction for men.

MICHAEL: Sorry to be cynical, but good luck. If we have seen anything it has been a desire for Bears to become fashionable. What else does *Bear Magazine* promote?

DAVID: I hardly think that anyone would call *Bear Magazine* fashionable, although it could be said to celebrate a certain style. It doesn't have the circulation of *Out* or *The Advocate*, which are clearly small mass-market journals.

MICHAEL: Of course, *Bear Magazine* is not "fashionable" in the sense that Calvin Klein is "fashionable," but it is trying to celebrate, promote, and market a style and a look. It exists—and presum-

ably makes money—by selling that look. If Calvin Klein or Ralph Lauren started a "Bear line" next season—not an impossible thought in an age when the economics of the industry cause fashions to change so quickly—Bears would be "in."

RON: There's been some mobilization around AIDS, but otherwise Bears are hardly political creatures.

MICHAEL: I do think that there is a patina of anti-class bias in Bear culture but this is actually a fantasy of working-class life. It's an idealization that implies that working class is more masculine and natural than those of lesser influence and wealth and looks. But this is a fantasy and one that is at totally at odds with real people's real lives.

RON: Unfortunately, Bear clubs tend to further stratify their members into inner circles—the A-Bears—and the rest of the group. Bear contests idealize pretty-boy Bears—sometimes called Glamour Bears—over the rest of the unfortunate plain-Jane Bears. It's the same old looksism all over again.

MICHAEL: My point exactly. Bear culture, like all socially constructed cultures based on certain identifiable attributes, becomes hierarchical.

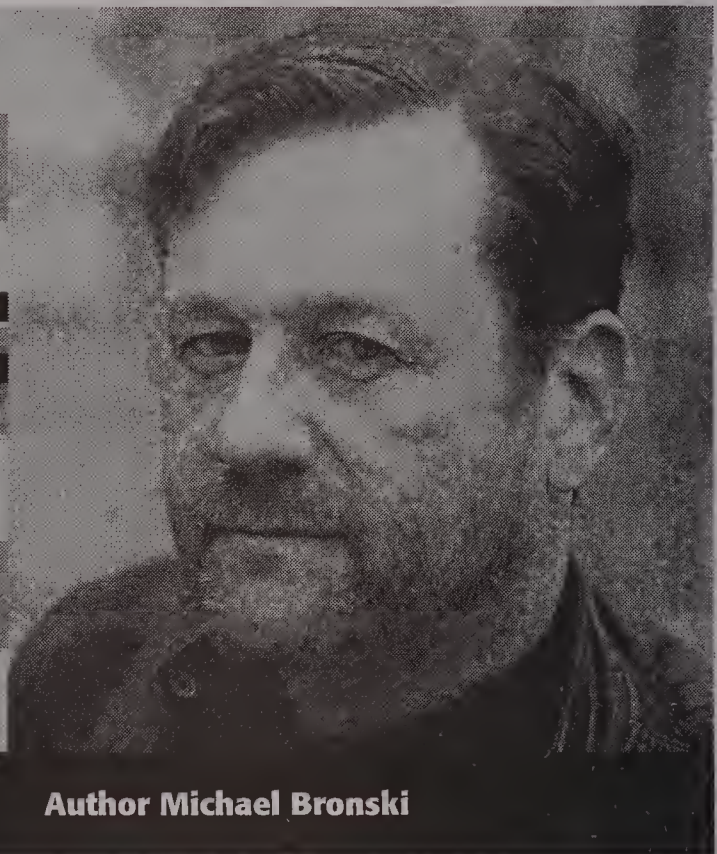
DAVID: Yes, Bears are becoming more and more like everyone else. They are the sweater queens of the nineties, but instead of wearing their angora over their bodies, the fur is applied directly to the skin.

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"Who is an American?":

Reviewing Michael Bronski's
Pleasure Principle

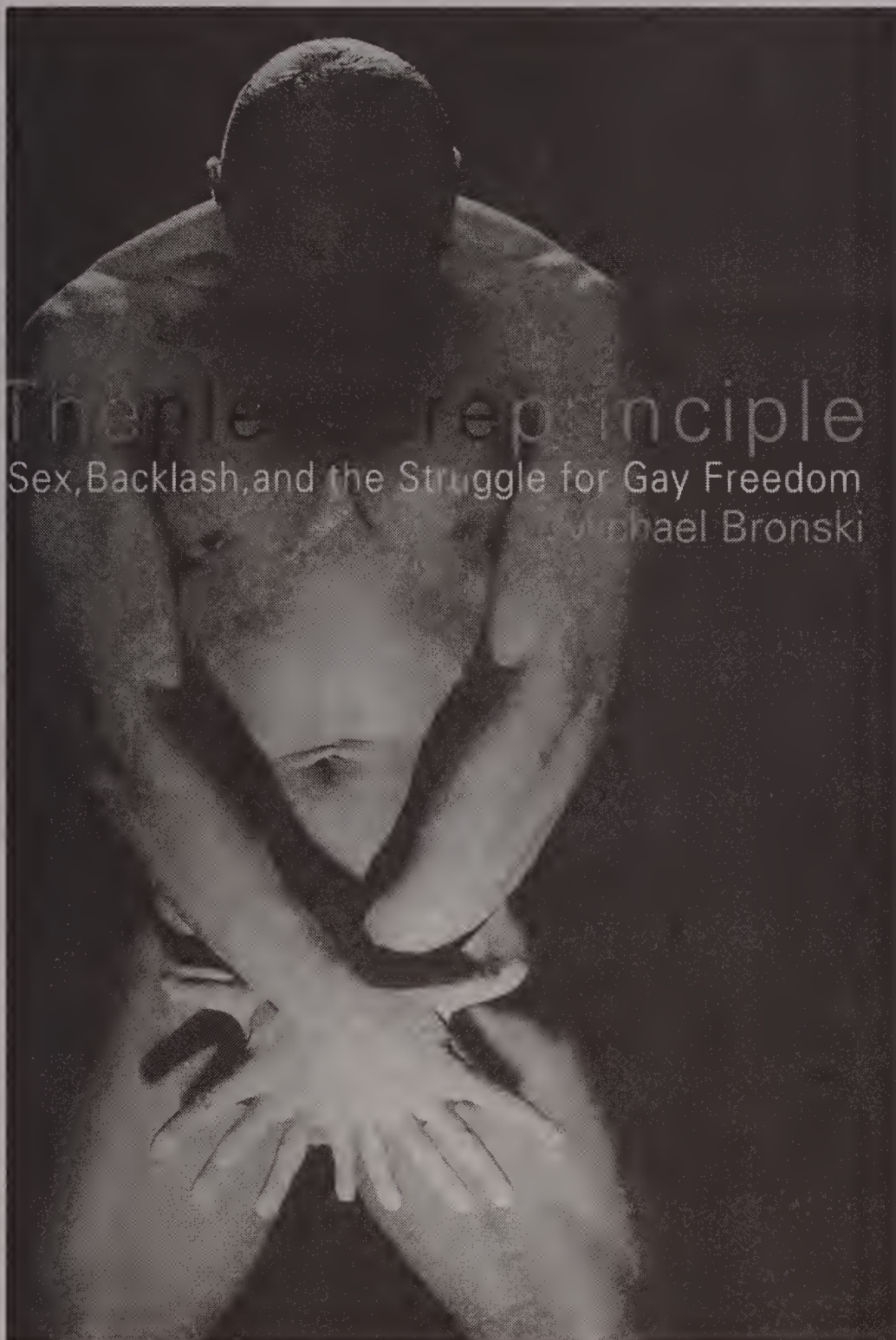


The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom by Michael Bronski New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Author Michael Bronski

Reviewed by John Keene

Nearly 30 years have passed since the momentous Stonewall Riots in New York City (and similar protests elsewhere in the United States) signaled homosexual peoples' public and unflinching response to their social and political repression. These revolutions in consciousness and action, which followed decades of grassroots efforts by lesbian, gay and bisexual groups as well as the struggle for civil rights by Black Americans, marked a permanent sea change in the public and private perception of homosexuals and homosexuality in the US and across the globe. Indeed, in the nearly three decades since 1969, lesbian, gay, same-gender-loving, bisexual, and transgender people have acted vigorously to ensure their place in American society and culture. Lesbians and gay men have militated for legal protections where none existed before; fought and legislated to strike down centuries-old sodomy statutes; "come out" as private citizens to family members and friends and publicly, in a range of occupations and professions, from the factory floor to the corporate boardroom; and produced an ever-expanding, open gay culture (or gay cultures) for gay and non-gay consumers. Indeed, there are now more self-identifying homosexual and bisexual people of all backgrounds living in the United States than ever before.



This self-transformation, however, has not come about without backlash, evidenced by the pernicious Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), the Right-wing's ex-gay (conversion) movement, the mistreatment of homosexual, bisexual and transgender youth, and the resurgence of gay-bashings, symbolized most prominently by the horrific torture and murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming. These various forms of backlash

demonstrate clearly that homosexuality, as an idea and as practice, continues to represent a major threat to the American social order.

This perceived threat and the reactions to it by mainstream America are two of many themes that Michael Bronski compellingly explores in his new study, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*. A veteran journalist, critic and

activist, and the author and editor of several notable works, including *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* and *Taking Liberties: Gay Men's Essays on Politics, Culture, and Sex*, Bronski employs a plethora of ideas, facts and positions in *The Pleasure Principle* to identify homosexuality's queer relation to the existing social order. As part of his analytical trajectory, he probes gay culture and politics from a range of perspectives—the function and place of popular culture, especially as informed by lesbians and gays in contemporary US, and the roles that sexuality—particularly homosexuality—plays in the lives both of lesbian and non-lesbian people.

Philosophical Pleasures

Through readings of social and political critics such as Freud, Schiller, Herbert Marcuse, and Norman O. Brown, and explorations into the sinews of history, culture and politics; Bronski fashions an effective, often dialectical method that succeeds in highlighting the contradictory place homosexuality occupies in the US cultural imagination. He opens with the idea of the “pleasure principle” as represented in Freud’s work. Bronski suggests, after Freud, that homosexuality, as sex without reproduction, represents the “unfettered pleasure principle” and that it privileges play over “the toil of building civilization.” Analogous to this is Schiller’s

John Keene

proposition that “following the order of sensuousness will lead to authentic freedom.” That is to say, sex (and sexuality) without reproduction moves the erotic from the realm of work (family/nation/race-building) to that of play (bliss/jouissance/freedom). Here he joins

Freud’s unfettered pleasure principle to Schiller’s play impulse. As Bronski notes throughout, this notion of pleasure, when realized, underlies not only many aspects of homosexuality, but resonates throughout historical experiments, including utopianism, communitarianism, free love movements, cooperative movements, and, most banefully for the Far Right, the counterculture movements of the 1960s.

But this, Bronski argues, is also why mainstream society believes and acts in order to constrain, repress and root out homosexuality. Lesbian and gay sex exemplify the idea that sexuality exists without reproduction—that, as play, as pleasure, sex can also pose and present new orders of freedom. Or as he writes, “[T]he specter of homosexuality—male and female—strikes directly at the heart of how culture and society are organized. Same-sex eroticism and relationships break down the accepted social structures; the model of the nuclear family is irrelevant. Appropriate gender roles are not applicable: butch women and nelly men destroy the two-gender dichotomy.” Given some of the recent public responses to issues involving homosexuality, this statement is nothing short of an apothegm. Throughout *The Pleasure Principle*, Bronski analyzes the relationship between citizenship and sexuality—as orientation, as self-representation, as practice—and ponders whether gay people, like any peoples marked as outside the mainstream, can fully realize their citizenship and humanity in the United States.

Bronski teases out the mainstream dilemma formed by the bristling tension between peoples “fear of homosexuality and gay culture” and the equally strong envy of and desire to enjoy what appears at times to be unbridled freedom and pleasure.

Bronski devotes the first half of his study to examining how both the dominant society and lesbians and gays construct and use pleasure, remembering that gay subcultures at times attempt to assimilate and other times reject heterosexual norms and values. With a journalist’s acu-

ity, he explores in depth how the mainstream regulates pleasure; specifically, he argues that homosexuality, as an identity and as a behavior, is viewed as “emblematic of sexual license and erotic freedom.” Here Bronski teases out the mainstream dilemma formed by the bristling tension between people’s “fear of homosexuality and gay culture” and the equally strong envy of and desire to enjoy what appears at times to be unbridled freedom and pleasure.

In the remainder of the book, Bronski investigates the effects of homosexuality and gay culture on the mainstream. He demonstrates how “the more pleasure-based arrangements of homosexual culture” have provided non-gay people with possible alternatives to the restrictive cultures and structures around them and, moreover, how public recognition of such arrangements has generated attendant heterosexual (and often homosexual) backlashes. Here he follows the diffusion of the eroticized male body from gay culture into tabloids, billboards, and movie screens; the heterosexist obsession with the protection of children from homosexuality that has accompanied the ever-increasing mainstream sexualization of young people; and the business and media construction of a “pleasure class” and the marketing of homosexuality as just another commodity. Alongside these topics, Bronski also manages to look at the issue of privacy (so central to the current Constitutional crisis emanating from a private, consensual sexual relationship revealed for political gain) and

Ron Suresha continued from page 37

its "failure." Lastly, he examines the role of the homosexual ghetto that, like other non-mainstream sites of cultural production (racial, ethnic, religious), is responsible for generating a great deal of what is considered essentially "American."

Bronski concludes *The Pleasure Principle* with a sober and searching chapter that begins in a retelling of the role of "Misrule," the European pagan celebrations that marked the capsizing of traditional social and cultural norms (symbolized in our own day by Mardi Gras and Halloween celebrations). He moves on to a discussion of the serious problems faced by gay people in gaining basic civil rights and becoming full citizens—problems that raise the fundamental question of what it means to be an "American," and the increasingly contentious question of who is able to become an "American." These questions, he ultimately concludes, have as much to do with culture as politics.

Parallel Problems

In his book, Bronski covers an impressive array of topics, but in a few instances, he attempts too much. His arguments become sketchy, in part because he is trying to weave together so many disparate strands. Moreover, he makes much of the relationship between race and sexuality, especially of the parallels between the struggles of Black Americans (and other racial minorities) and lesbians and gays. While he does not do so lightly, as far too many critics tend to do, I did wonder whether at times such comparisons did not elide the complex reality of Black homosexuals and of white gay exclusivism (and ethnocentrism) which has damaged the prospects for intergroup coalition-building and, in light of the effort to mainstream homosexuality, of gay and Black liberation. Bronski does address issues concerning lesbians and bisexual women, but, like transgender people, they sometimes remain at the rim of his discussions, which center on gay men, or on "lesbians and gays" as an undifferentiated, political entity.

Nevertheless, Bronski provides a truly enjoyable, vital, and always readable exploration into the relationship between culture(s) and politics, particularly with

RON: Very good. Final comments?

MICHAEL: I am glad that—in this increasingly mandated world of sexual and body conformity—Bears have created a new and approved way for gay men to look. The point, it seems, is to create endless ways for people to look and to make sure that, no matter how someone looks, they are not ostracized, ignored, or discriminated against.

DAVID: Bear life, like gay life in general, is part of American culture, not separate from it. And it has the same limitations and problems as American culture. Insofar as Bears have become exclusive and hierarchical, it is because American culture is. Bear culture denies this because America denies its classist base. I think Michael and I are in virtual agreement.

RON: Great. Thank you both very much.

An excerpt from the complete article in the forthcoming **BEAR BOOK 2,** edited by Les Wright, to be published by The Haworth Press, 1999. All rights reserved.

DAVID BERGMAN is author or editor of a dozen books, including *Cracking the Code*, which won the George Elliston Poetry Prize, *Heroic Measures*, and *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representations in American Literature*. His work has also appeared in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Men's Style*, *The New Republic*, and *The Paris Review*. He also edits the biennial series *Men on Men: Best New Gay Fiction* and with Joan Larkin the book series *Out Lives: Lesbian and Gay Autobiographies*. He teaches at Towson University.

MICHAEL BRONSKI is author of *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* and *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*, and editor of *Taking Liberties: Gay Men's Essays on Sex, Politics, and Culture* and *Flashpoint: Gay Male Sexual Writing*. His writing has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Z Magazine*, *Out*, and *Gay Community News*. He has been involved in the Gay Liberation Movement for thirty years.

RON SURESHA has edited several alternative periodicals and was involved with the early San Francisco Bears. For the past ten years he has worked as freelance editor and proofreader for Shambhala Publications of Boston. *The Bear Book* included two essays of his, "Bear Roots" and "Bear Mecca: The Lone Star Saloon Revisited." His writing has appeared in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* and *Visionary*.

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Susan Raffo

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is affecting the funding of other county and state supported agencies.

"Organizing around the issue of welfare reform," says Jeremy Hanson, Public Policy Programs Coordinator at the Minneapolis AIDS Project (MAP), "demands a lot of ally building. Even in general welfare reform and disability conversations, it's not always obvious to those involved that GLBT and HIV issues are involved. People working in the area of welfare reform have to be educated regarding the GLBT connection as much as GLBT people have to be educated about the role of welfare reform in our lives and communities."

A number of MAP's clients are people who are either on public assistance and/or who receive food assistance and/or public or subsidized housing. A recent survey shows that over half of MAP's clients are currently living on an annual income of \$12,000 or less. Within this, and of specific interest to MAP, is the area of disability and how people living with disabilities are affected by the ongoing welfare reform. "We are particularly concerned as to whether or not people living with disabilities might be exempt from the five year life time limit and from the job requirements," says Hanson. "This is important, because some people [who are] living with a disability—which in our minds is inclusive of all people living with HIV—or [who are] the primary care provider of some people living with a disability, are placed in a specific situation which prevents them from obtaining or retaining traditional work."

"We haven't done any type of research yet," continues Hanson. "There are many more subtle implications for GLBT people in all of these changes. For example, we know that discrimination against people who are GLBT or HIV+ happens in the workplace and happens in regard to housing. What will happen if we're not careful is that the ongoing welfare reform will ignore and thereby foster additional barriers to individuals trying to secure stable housing and stable jobs. If we force people into the workforce, we have to acknowledge that they might be facing additional bar-

riers based on their sexual orientation. While the larger GLBT movement has worked on issues of domestic partnership benefits and inclusive work environments in the white collar sectors, there has been little attention paid to these same issues in the low wage sectors. With so many people being put into the position of taking whatever job comes along just to feed their families and themselves, this could become an even greater problem."

Ann DeGroot raises another point. "Much of the funding currently being cut is youth funding. The youth thing is very hot politically right now. There are a lot of different agencies serving a number of different needs. The area of youth funding is seen as the place to make the big cuts." "The potential raised by welfare reform will be a greater competition for the services that already exist," echoes Mary Weeks, Executive Director of Minneapolis Youth Diversion (MYDP) and its Project Offstreets, a program for homeless youth that provides case managers who work specifically with GLBT youth. During the recent funding cycle, MYDP faced potential county cuts that would have sliced their operating budget in half. While that funding has been restored, the feeling among many county-funded agencies is caution. The change in what is available to individuals receiving MFIP has the potential of increasing the need for social services rather than decreasing them.

"My biggest concern," continues Weeks, "is the older teen, the fifteen to seventeen year old and particularly the boys. Whenever funding is cut, decisions need to be made. This is true whether we are talking at the level of the county or the level of the family. As the money available to families decreases, those families are forced to make decisions. Some might say to their oldest sons, teenagers with large appetites, we can't afford you anymore. You need to figure out how to make it on your own. This is especially true when a family is looking at the possibility of homelessness." Sometimes those older teens will leave voluntarily, just drift away from the family knowing that their absence will lessen the family's economic burden.

If a youth already feels isolated by their family, for

example if they're struggling with sexual identity issues, the added economic struggle makes leaving that much more tempting. And additionally, if a youth comes out in a family in which economic burdens are already great, this might seem like the final straw and kicking the kid out might feel like killing two birds with one stone. The increased threat that welfare reform brings to youth does not cover only youth who live in poverty. "Even if GLBT youth weren't poor before they became homeless," says Weeks, "they are poor now. It takes a lot of money to move out of homelessness."

"Funding is not increasing or growing, it's being cut," says DeGroot. "That's having an effect on everyone who has been used to funding. Even if an organization is not currently facing cuts, the emotional climate and expectations have changed." The current welfare reform has the potential of putting more people in situations without a job that pays a living wage and guarantees benefits. This means the need for extra services to fill in the holes not covered by a low wage job. In a climate of cut backs, most service organizations end up competing for a steadily shrinking pool of money.

Welfare reform is about gays and lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people because some of us are on welfare. The lives of those on welfare might not be represented in the magazines and television shows that portray us, but they are as much a part of GLBT communities as are those who can afford two vacations a year. This reason should be enough to show that welfare reform is a GLBT issue. But it isn't enough and it's not the only reason. The debates that led to the current welfare reforms are the same debates that created the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy or the Defense of Marriage Act. They are the same debates that turned the most recent wave of immigrants into pariahs and that led to the bombing of abortion clinics in the south and northeast. They are the same debates that fostered the beliefs expressed by some of the men interviewed during the recent showing of Arthur Dong's "Licensed to Kill." We need to remember that every time the words "family" and "tradition" and "values" are cited, we are not included just as those women who sometimes need

public aid to feed their children are not included. Welfare reform, in the end, is about everyone who doesn't fit into the traditional and narrow image of a nuclear family. If you're reading this paper, chances are this means you.

Susan Raffo is the editor of *Queerly Classed* (South End Press 1997) and co-editor with Victoria Brownworth of the upcoming *Restricted Access: Lesbians and Disability* (Seal Press, Fall 1999).

John Keene review continued from page 41

**...he recovers homosexuality as
site and source of pleasure
(and culture), as a terrain from
which freedom and possibility
can emerge.**

regard to homosexuality and contemporary American society. In the process, he underlines that becoming an "American," like the production of American culture, always has been and remains political. Most importantly, he recovers homosexuality as site and source of pleasure (and culture), as a terrain from which freedom and possibility can emerge. Or as he astutely points out, because "homosexuality [represents] a much-needed challenge to the existing system of social and sexual conformity that curtails personal freedoms and undercuts human's realization of potential... it is not only a permissible behavior but a necessary one." In our own era of gay assimilation and mainstreaming, we cannot repeat this statement enough, and Michael Bronski's valuable volume is one means of helping us not to forget it.

John Keene is a writer and critic living in Jersey City, NJ.

pen pals

The Gay and Lesbian Prisoner Project, a program of the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation, works to support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender prisoners by providing them with information, referrals and support. Many are incarcerated simply for who they are or whom they love. Others face harassment and discrimination. The prisoners listed below are seeking pen pals who will write to them. While we try to publish as many ads as possible in Gay Community News, the number of ads we receive far exceeds the space we are provided. Offer your support, learn about prison life and make a new friend by writing to one of the people listed below. Become involved with the Prisoner Project by volunteering. Please call (617) 262-6969. [NOTE: Ad corresponds to prisoner listed below the ad]

GWM, 29 yrs old, brn hair haz eyes, 156 lbs, 5' 8.5". Release date 11/99. I enjoy fish camping, playing music. I am seeking GM or queens, lesbian, age unimportant for friendship, possibly more. Will relocate. This is first time ad ever, your letter gets mine. Are you out there? Write to:

David Neal,
#970834-SHU
Wabash Valley
Correctional Fac.
Carlisle, IN 47838

GWM, 26, 6'2", 180 lbs, looking for friendship or relationship with Black or Latin men, but any race is welcome to write. I will answer all letters. Write to:

Kevin Meehan
P.O. Box 3310
Oshkosh, WI 54903-3310

OPEN YOUR HEART and I'll open mine, and together we'll conquer love, friendship and time! Impressive Native American seeks soul mate to ride the waves of life. Respond to:

John M. Lundy, #725019
P.O. Box 900
Shelton, WA 98584

GWM, 37 yrs, good looking, 5' 6", 155 lbs, salt and pepper hair. Straight acting and appearing—seeks quality friendship with warm and caring person. Honesty and sincerity a must. Will send photo. Looking forward to hearing from you. Write to:

Mr. George Cahoon
#W 61425
P.O. Box 100
S. Walpole, MA 02071

6'0" BM, 27 yrs, 230 lbs B/eyes. Enjoys weight lifting, RB music, sports, reading. Very open-minded and will write all, even if the w. Write to:

Jerene Mundine,
#627222
9601 Spur 591
Amarillo, TX 79107

GWM soon to be released, would like to meet a young Black male who is masculine & dominant. I am very truthful, honest, no games, and no lies. I am stable and well off. Inmates OK. I am looking for a serious trusting relationship. Please send photo. Write to:

Richard Porrman,
#280652
Northern State Prison
P.O. Box 2300/168
Frontage Rd.
Newark, NJ 07114

GM, 5' 2", 160 lbs, brn hair, blue eyes from Columbus, OH would love to write to any and all gay men free or in prison. Love music of all kinds and play guitar. Release date 7/99. I'm looking for that special someone. Will answer all. Write to:

Eddie B. Suttle
189-380, h-2-w-38
Southeastern Corr. Inst.
5900 B.I.S. Rd.
Lancaster, OH 43130

44 yrs old, brn hair and eyes, weight 200, looking for young stud gay guy any age. Write to:

Jose Cavazos, #725510
4051-B
3001 S. Emily Drive
Beeville, TX 78102

Have been incarcerated for 14 yrs and am seeking different perspectives and attitudes. All answered. Write:

Barry Wynn, #450104
Wynne Unit
Huntsville, TX 77349

"Jasmyn" long-legged transsexual, 6'1", 160 lbs, tna, 23 yrs old, White, brn hair and eyes. Looking for friendship in all the wrong places. Write to:

Jay McCulley
324 W. Campbell Ave. SW
Roanoke, VA 24016

23 y.o., Hispanic/German, 5'11", 180, br/bl eyes, med build, good shape, honest, single BWM, outdoors man, shy & modest/open-minded, looking for gay or bi male for friendship and correspondence while in prison and possibly more when released. Serious replies only, I'm very low on funds. Write to:

Shawn Liquia, #347407
Waupun Corr. Institution
P.O. Box 351
Waupun, WI 53963-0351

GWM age 23, 5'8", 151 lbs, blnd hair and blue eyes is seeking friendship, not a sugar daddy. Interests are far too many to list. But was raised a country boy so that gives you the general idea. I will gladly answer all who write, so let's talk and see what tomorrow may bring us. Write to:

Charles Stiffler
#112385
P.O. Box 514
G-1-115
Granute, OK 73547

SB bi-male, brn eyes, blk hair, 185 lbs, 6'1", disease-free. Sincere and attractive man, looking for someone with a positive outlook. I enjoy reading, music and a good conversation. Seeking intelligent, sincere, caring and secure queen, TV, TS or feminine GM for friendship and possible relationship. Age and race not important. Photo appreciated. Write to:

Larry DeVon Moore
#W-56361
P.O. Box 1218 MED
Shirley, MA 01464

GWM, 29 yrs, 156 lbs, 5'9", blue eyes, brn hair. Interested in pen pal who will write openly and honestly. Write to:

Jefferey Copeland
#791021, R-1 Unit
1100 FM 655
Rosharon, TX 77583

GWM, DOB 2/13/53, 6'3", 193lbs. Br hair/eyes, 8" long-51/2" thick fat pink head. Up for parole 8/02. Am top who likes both pass-agr. Called The Stud Master, am not passive in how I act, I seek LTR with gay males, and TV/TS - femmy, sassy fuck boy, dick sucker, all ages-races. No con games, just an old timer who needs someone to love and to love me in return. Please send embossed envelope, it's the only kind I can receive, just one per letter please. I do detailed short erotic stories w/drawings. Will make you hot and throbbing
Thomas M. Blankenship
195152 Manford Rd. #AC
Lucasville, OH 45699

D.O.B. 1/6/63, 5'7.5", 135 lbs, blk hair, brn eyes, American Indian, Yaqui & Latin American. Educated Native American artist in search of friendship, encouragement, entertainment in someone with full time energy and fun. Photo with letter preferred but not required. Serious replies only. Write to:

Micahale Anthony Ramos
#54658
AZ State Prison Douglas
Mohave North Unit
Box 5002
Douglas, AZ 85608-5002

21 y.o. white male. Have been told that I'm very good looking and sexy. Looking for a serious friendship and maybe a possible loving r'ship if you're the right person. Only serious people need respond. I am currently incarcerated but looking for freedom in the future. I don't have time for games, I'm just lonely and need someone. If you're serious and interested, I'm here for your taking

Daniel S. Boyd 974259
W.V.C.F
PO Box 1111
Carlisle, IN 47838

HIV positive male, seeking friendship and correspondence with like minded individuals, for friendship. AGE, sex, race, unimportant. Will answer all who write

Garrett Brown
A-915296 H1-201-L
Taylor Correctional Inst.
PO Box 1728
Perry, FL 32348

GWM, 2/3/79, 5'6", 130 lbs. Brn hair, grn eyes. Mellow, honest, lonely, ISO long term relationship and relocation upon release. Your picture gets mine.

Donny Lee #104537
Arizona State Prison
Box 8600
Florence, AZ 85232

25 y.o. bi BM, 5'7", 210, br hair/eyes. My hobbies are lifting weights, swimming, traveling and my favorite sport is football. The person I'm looking for has to be honest, faithful and very nice. And most of all not afraid of love if it goes that far. Age of person can be 25-35, looks not important. I'm tired of people using me for sex. I want real love, so help me. Prefer someone not incarcerated but will be happy to write someone incarcerated like me.

Michael Appling
#664150
Hughes Unit
RT. 2 Box 4400
Gatesville, TX 76597

SBM, 37y.o. Seeks mutual friendship with someone of like desires. 6'3", 209lbs. Open, honest, poetic, sincere. Perhaps a chance in a lifetime—in a lifetime full of chance (?) Will respond to all inquiries ASAP.

Michael David Taylor
CEC#C87324
Pleasant Valley State Prison
PO Box 8502
Coaling, CA 93210

Down Transsexual, searching for that special someone to share correspondence, friendship, etc. 32 y.o. 5'4", 130lbs, long brunette hair, bl eyes. Into being feminine and dressing sexy. Classic rock and heavy metal. Should be set free within the next 3 yrs. Only honest and real need write. I am in an institution that does not accept incoming mail from other prisons, so please send letter through somebody from the "street". Thank you.

J.D. Scripter #131091
KMCC
PO Box 710
Keen Mountain, VA 34624

Black Bi Male, 5'9 1/2", Lt brn eyes, 31 y.o., My hobbies are fishing, drawing, TV, meeting new friends, writing letters, and reading. Will respond to all over 21. I am hoping to find a pen pal from the free world, either straight or gay, male or female cause I don't have anybody writing me and I'm feeling down and out.

Phillip Clark #540032
9601 Spur 591
Amarillo, TX 79107

32 yo GWM seeks friends for correspondence. I enjoy reading, writing, movies, music, the outdoors and I am a classical civilization and art history major (*freshman). I'm not looking for hand-outs, only reminders that there is a civilized world out there. All letter answered.

George Steele #360094
London Correctional
Institution
PO Box 69
London, OH 43140

I would like to someone that lives the kind of lifestyle that I am used to. It's not as hard as it started out to be, but I'll be here until the year 2000 and would like a gay pen pay.

Johnny Bindow
#9346592
9601 Spur 591
Amarillo, TX 79107

I'm Bi, 5'6", 135 lbs with long blond hair and baby blue eyes. Am looking for a friend who would be willing to write and spend some quality time with me. I will also be willing to write transsexuals and lesbians.

George Meniffee
DOC#856514
SHU-A5-101
Indiana Dept. of Correction
Wabash Valley
Correctional Facility
PO Box 1111
Carlisle, IN 47838

I am a white male, 5'8 1/2", brn hair, bl eyes, 170 lbs, and in very good health, and I am very much on the gay side. Would like pen pals to correspond with, to pass this time away, like younger guys, and women correspondence also. Friendship is a must. Please! Help me if you would and can.

Roger McClure
#512012, 3B-737
Moberly Correctional Ctr
PO Box 7
Moberly MO 65270

I am a black man, 33 y.o. and 185 lbs, and look good. I am a BI male who is looking for a friend to write to and someone who will write back. I like to have fun with women and men. I will be getting out of here soon and maybe you can be my friend for life. I like all colors. I hope to hear from someone soon.

Robert Talley #211412
R.M.S.I. Unit 1A-106
7475 Cockrill Bend Ind. Rd.
Nashville, TN 37209-1010

Looking for a pen-pal so I can have a friend in here to write to. I am also relationship minded. I also have pictures of me if a pen-pal wants one of me. I will be getting out in around 2 1/2 yrs. I just went to my first parole board. I was turned down but next one looks good.

David Smith #113590
C-B-6 Unit 1_B-32
Arizona State Prison
Complex - Florence
PO Box 8600
Florence, AZ 85232

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